

# The BOFH Stories 1996

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## The Bastard Operator From Hell kicks in the New Year with a few sex aids ...

It's a very sad time of the year. Having spent the Christmas period in the office, neatly combining the filling in of a timesheet liberally scattered with numbers in the 'overtime' column with the avoidance of certain members of the family, it's terribly irritating to see all these hung-over employees dragging themselves miserably back into the office with the sole intention of breaking my network.

You see, during the shutdown period I received not one single support call, confirming my theory that my network is indeed perfect, and that all faults are user-inflicted.

It would seem from the system logs that I wasn't the only one in over Christmas: looks like the head of engineering has been around, faxing out dozens of orders for bits and bobs to put in the new shake-test line they're hurrying to build down in Quality Assurance.

The gossip around the office, though, is that the CEO is really mad - the line was meant to be running in time for the New Year, and from all accounts, it's nowhere near completed.

The most interesting snippet from the network fax log is that the software patch I installed on the server seems to have kicked in for at least one outgoing call ...

It's an entertaining little patch, and fixes the most common problem with all networked fax systems around the world - the fact that they're terribly dull.

The update in question is simple, yet brilliant: the network manager specifies search and replace filters for outgoing messages, which can brighten up messages immensely if used properly. You can even program it to divert faxes to a different country according to your own parameters ...

The phone rings.

"Good morning, you're the first caller of the year, how can I help you?" (Sometimes, my charm surprises even myself)

"Chief engineer here. Is the fax system working?"

"Certainly is, in fact, I've just been checking it a moment or two ago. Why? Are you having problems?"

"Yes. I ordered some kit for the new QA line before the break, but the supplier reckons the fax never arrived. Can you check it out for me? I sent it on December the 22nd, and it claimed to get there OK. The purchase order number is PE4456."

A quick 'grep' on the fax log turns up the fax in question.

"Well, it's here in the system log, and it certainly went OK. Quantity 48, product description 'Vibrator (three-phase, heavy-duty)'. Perhaps your supplier is trying it on."

"Yes, that's probably right. Many thanks."

"You're welcome".

I wonder ...

The phone rings. CLI says it's Goods Inwards.

"Machine room."

"Goods Inwards here. We have a delivery with no contact name. The supplier says it was ordered by fax - can you find out who sent the order with that fancy gadget of yours?"

"Sure, no problem. What's the order number?"

"PE4456."

"Let's see ... Yes, that was ordered on the 22nd of last month, by the head of engineering."

"Thanks mate."

I'm sure I hear sniggering as the phone is put down.

Time, and several levels of Doom III (beta, naturally) pass uneventfully before there's a knock at the door. Deftly switching Doom to 'Boss Mode', I motion the chief engineer to enter.

"Something's wrong with your fax system," he blurts.

"Really? How come?"

"You know that fax I mentioned? I just tried to re-send it, but it hasn't got there."

"Well, let's test the system."

I compose a quick fax on my PC, plug one of the old fax machines I've got lying in the corner into a spare line, and click 'send'. The machine springs into life, faithfully reproducing the test message.

Well, it would, wouldn't it - I didn't put the word 'vibrator' in my message ... so it didn't get redirected to Siggi's Sex Emporium in Rotterdam ...

"There you go," I proudly exclaim to my spanner-wielding colleague. "Nothing wrong with that. You'll have to tell your suppliers that their machine is on the blink."

"Oh well, thanks for checking."

Serves him right for doubting my systems.

The phone rings again.

"Machine room, BOFH speaking."

"CEO here. Tell me, have you seen Bradshaw from engineering? They tell me he was on his way to see you about a system problem."

"Yes, he just walked out of the door. Why?"

"Oh, I'm just wondering why Goods Inwards have brought me a box containing four dozen three-speed sex aids, as ordered by our engineering friend from Siggi's Sex Emporium in Rotterdam. Don't suppose you can shed any light?"

"Well, I can certainly go through the fax log for you - it's all here in black and white ..."

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### **The Bastard Operator From Hell has an appraisal meeting ...**

It's a nippy afternoon when I get to work to find an e-mail memo indicating that the computer has randomly selected me for a supervisor appraisal scheme. My supervisor is especially surprised because he distinctly remembers having my name removed from the list. "Random" can be such a misleading word.

Late in the afternoon I get to the interview with one of the senior execs and a Mr Grey (by name and nature) from a staffing resource company. The interview kicks off with:

"Simon, I believe you're aware of the purpose of this interview?" Grey smarms.

"Yes, where you discover that my supervisor ALMOST has the technical competence to remember his phone number if prompted eleven times."

"I don't think it's quite that bad" Grey chuckles..

The exec looks slightly uncomfortable.

"His HOME number. His office number is 4 prompts. That's only an extension."

"Yes. Well, he must be technically competent to be in this position!"

"Or be related to the CEO or the CEO's wife. Or plays golf at the same club. Or knows someone who plays golf at the same club. Or knows what a golf club looks like ..."

"I take it your opinion of your supervisor isn't particularly high?"

"No."

Exec looks distinctly uncomfortable now.

"For what reasons?"

"Well, let's be honest. Prior to this position, my supervisor paper-shuffled in a large factory known for its baked beans"

"I see. His network experience?"

"..resulted from him being the CEO's wife's second cousin" I reply.

"Ah"

"In all honesty, the guy couldn't examine a litter and find a runt, let alone a network. When I told him we should consider getting ATM in the Computer Room he ordered a new Barclaycard. I told him we had an internet firewall and he asked about extinguishers to go with it."

"I see. Perhaps his knowledge is more the planning field, as expected from a supervisor?"

"Possibly. Still I wonder why, when I suggested a heavier move to fibre he thanked me but said he was quite regular as it was."

"Ah. Well, what do YOU expect from someone in that position?" Grey asks

"The ability to add, subtract, read and write without having to stick his tongue out. The sense to sign his name to everything I put in front of him no matter how controversial it might appear"

"So you envisage that he is nothing more than a 'yes man'."

"Yes."

"Well, We'll perhaps agree to disagree on that one. Surely you can't expect him to sign anything without a thorough examination; after all, a delay of a few days is not likely to inconvenience anyone. As to your relationship, whilst it seems apparent that your supervisor is not optimum for the position, your opinion seems stunted and mostly reprehensible"

"Hmmm." I say, feigning concerned thought, "I see that we've probably reached an impasse" then I get up and leave.

On the way out I hear Exec warning Grey not to use the lifts or get into any computer controlled access areas. For that he shall be punished ...

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I'm watching the closed-circuit-tv at 6:17pm when a shadow detaches itself from the others and breaks for the doors ...

A quick >clickety< >click< on the keyboard and the revolving door halts mid-spin as the security alarms activate.

I wander downstairs 20 minutes later as if to exit via the doors. A crowd has gathered to watch security attempt to free Grey from inside the door. I smile benignly as Grey catches my gaze.

"DON'T WORRY" I shout "WE CAN ALWAYS BREAK THE GLASS TO GET YOU OUT!"

"Armour Glass" a guard chips in. "Have to put a car into it to break it - wouldn't do him much good"

"There's always the emergency override" I add helpfully

"Something went wrong. The whole panel's dead"

"Really?" I say, looking at Grey. "Well, the maintenance contract was part of the budget request MY SUPERVISOR REFUSED TO SIGN THIS AFTERNOON. STILL A DELAY OF A FEW DAYS IS NOT LIKELY TO INCONVENIENCE ANYONE. "

The guard mumbles. "We thought if we cut the wires to the locking plate it would release"

"If it were that simple any burglar could get in." I say, "NOW IT'S ON AN INTERNAL INDEPENDENT BATTERY. TAKES 48 HOURS TO DISCHARGE!"

"What can we do?" the guard asks.

"Well, Taco Shells and cheese slices sound like a good idea"

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"To slide under the door to him. He's got to eat! I just hope he's BEEN TO THE TOILET RECENTLY. WOULD HATE TO SPEND 48 HOURS LOCKED IN A GLASS CABINET WITH FULL EXPOSURE TO THE STREET AND ONLY MY BRIEFCASE AT MY 'CONVENIENCE!"

Life can be so cruel especially when you're trying not to think about things ...

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### **The Bastard Operator From Hell educates a PFY ...**

It's a quiet Monday morning as I wander into my office and make for my desk, only to discover its pristine surface has been taken over by what can only be described as a Pimply-Faced-Youth.

"Hi!", the PFY gasps ", I'm the new network trainee you organised last week"

Instead of stopping, I drop my case and about-face to the Boss's office. He informs me in no uncertain terms that the salary review he suffered after my report to the supervisor review last week has in no way contributed to what might appear to the casual observer as a vendetta. Pure coincidence.

He also informs me that the PFY is not only here to stay (at his appointment), but might even stay longer than myself. I'm to train him to the point of absolute confidence ...

Sadly, there's only room in my office for one, but that can wait.

...

"I've been answering the phones while you were away!", PFY cries as I return, brandishing a huge wadge of "While you were out" messages.

I decide to give every impression of complying with the boss's wishes.

"OK, file them then look at this", I say, switching on the network monitor.

"Where should I file them?"

"The filing cabinet", I say.

"But I can't see a ..."

"The round one ..."

"... on the floor ..."

"... IN THE CORNER !!"

"One was important!", he gasps.

"This is networking, they're all important. Now, it's imperative to be able to recognise important users when they phone".

"Oh. How do I do that?"

"You don't, it was a joke. This is networking, remember? They take what they get and are happy with it or they get an 'upgrade' to a 150 baud modem on an unfiltered power supply".

"How've you managed to stay here?"

"Hmm. A clever mix of superior intelligence, indispensibility and ruthless blackmail where required. Hasn't failed me yet. Now, I'll wager my next pay cheque that 90 per cent of those complaints you took this morning were from the payments department - am I right?"

"Yes! Is their network faulty?"

"No, it's more of a protocol problem".

"What, protocol as in TCP/IP and stuff?"

"No, more like protocol as in 'When Simon asks to be reimbursed for some technical manuals, reimburse him straight away'. True, it's mostly undocumented, but around here it's pretty much a defacto standard".

"So what do we do about the errors?"

"Nothing. We mention that it's a network error we haven't seen before that's probably described in a technical manual somewhere, then we implement the 'never-fail network error resolution technique'".

"What's that?"

"We solve all problems with a 'Router Reset'"

"I don't understand ..."

"Simplicity itself!! Someone calls up with a 'networking' problem; you go and power-cycle their router. Then you wander round their department and say that you simply *had* to do it because the person concerned had an urgent problem that couldn't wait. You'd be amazed at the departmental hostility you can generate in just one week. If you *really* want to stir things up, do it 10 minutes prior to lunchtime - no-one saves their work before then so applications hang and people lose everything".

"What happens then?"

"We're 'just doing our job', of course! But up in the departments it becomes a demilitarised zone! Things start disappearing, lunches start getting doses of cayenne pepper, then, slowly but surely, the calls stop. If someone has an outage, they won't dare call us, they call the helpdesk."

"And what do they do about the errors?"

"They write out a 'while you were out' message".

"And then?"

"Then they pass them on to us".

"And we ..."

"FILE THEM!"

"What do we do for the rest of the time?"

"Monitor how the network is REALLY working, where bottlenecks are occurring, and also plan for upgrades in the next budget round"

"Really?"

"Don't be stupid. You any good at Immortal Kombat?"

"I'm OK.."

"Right, doubles. Winner does the next reset, loser buys the doughnuts".

It's a tough life at the top, but life is what you make it ...

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### **The Bastard Operator From Hell meets his match, but keeps a hold ... just ...**

Things seem to be working out OK with my pimply-faced-youth trainee, surprisingly enough. He's keen to please, but I'll cure that in a couple of weeks after exposure to some of the more demanding clients ...

Speaking of exposure and clients, one of our more annoying ones resigned recently after some rather personal images were left in the memory of the "loaner" digital camera. It's all very strange too, as the erase function was working perfectly when I 'serviced' the camera a week ago. The incident would've been less severe had the finder of the images not downloaded one into the Windows Start-up Screen of everyone on his floor. The victim claimed in his defence, of course, that the image had been touched up, but consensus of opinion was that it wasn't the image that was getting that treatment. Dirty sod.

PFY is concerned, and obviously needs counselling about it.

"What's the problem?", I ask.

"Well, it's just that I don't understand how the image could have got onto all those PCs".

"I see. I guess someone managed to break into the application server and forced it to upload it to certain desktops".

"But the server is protected by a password and so is the version control program, so how did they get in?"

"Someone must have found out the passwords", I reply, waiting for the inevitable.

"But only you and I know the passwords, and I only found out yesterday".

"Did you write the passwords down?"

"Well yes, but they're locked in my drawer".

I shake my head sadly. "And who has keys to your drawer?", I ask.

"Just you and me".

"And did you do it?"

"No".

"Then, by a process of elimination, it must have been me that opened your drawer, read your passwords and logged into the server as you".

"You did it?!"

"Of course. You don't think anyone else in the department could, do you? Hell, the only other person with overriding access is the system manager, and he's so slow he needs a tow-ropes!"

"Why did you do it?"

"Because you needed to learn the value of security. I'm sure that piece of knowledge will serve you well in your next job which will probably start sometime after tomorrow".

"B..b..b"

"No use butting".

"But, I was going to say that surely you're not going to make me tell Uncle Brian this was my fault, are you?"

Warning Bells On!

"Uncle Brian?"

"Uncle Brian, you know, on the 6th floor. The big office with the leather furniture. I'd hate to disagree with your report to the CEO".

UNCLE Brian ... Uncle Brian, the CEO. I should have known that this wasn't a run-of-the-mill shafting. This was big-time.

"Well, perhaps it's best to put it down to some outside hacker", I say, in what I believe to be a kindly manner.

"Or some inside hacker ...".

PFY smiles, looking menacing.

The sneaky bastard! Perhaps he has potential after all!

"... like our Boss", he adds, letting me off the hook entirely.

There but for the grace of god ...

"OK", I say, seizing the opportunity before he can realise the enormous potential of blackmail. "You tell Uncle Brian and I'll slip your keys into the top desk of his drawer".

"Done!"

Ten minutes later we watch on with interest and sugary donuts as yet another boss is escorted from the hallowed halls of hell.

"You realise he was the one that got you this job", I say.

"Yeah, but no point in being sentimental", he replies.

Definite Potential.

"Right, what shall we do now?" he asks, keen to learn.

"Well, I think it's about time we pull the plug on a remote site, then phone them to tell them it's because the labels on their EPROMs have expired and they need to remove them in a well-lit area, like some bright sunshine .".

"Won't that ...?"

"Yup."

"Let's do it".

You can't PAY for a job like this ...

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### **The Bastard Operator From Hell won't stand for interference with his printing systems ...**

It's a pleasantly cool morning as I lie back in my armchair and plot the next surprise in the users' lives. Well, it's pleasantly cool for me, anyway - due to a tragic error in the air conditioning system, every other room in the building is alternating between temperatures more normally associated with the arctic and the tropics.

Some of the brighter staff tried jamming the stairwell doors open until a fire alarm was strangely triggered there a couple of times in succession, and security arrived to ensure that their smoke-stop capability wasn't being impaired. It's for their own good.

Because of all this activity my room, which is normally very busy at this point in the publicity year, is fairly quiet right now. Amazingly, my pimply-faced trainee has turned out to be a fiend with a scarcely human face. He's managed to 'persuade' the personnel manager to send him on a 'First principles of management' course... in Paris. Not bad for a non-manager and a newcomer - could it have been something to do with the e-mail filter he placed in the human resources department? Tut, tut - all those young secretaries.

I'm thinking that my whole day will pass by peacefully, without being disturbed by pointless queries. Touch wood.

Too late, the phone rings. It's a user.

"Hi, I'm writing this program to poll our printer to see if ...". I hang up.

It rings again: "Hi, I'm writing ...". I hang up.

Once more it rings: "Hi, I ...". I hang up.

The learning curve of these people is so near to horizontal you could play bowls on it, so I leave the phone off the hook. Ten minutes later the geek's knocking on my door. I just have time to replace the phone on the hook before he comes in.

"Hi, I was trying to ring you but your phone must be broken ...".

I point at the "Console of Hell" and shake my head. "It's the console," I say quietly. "It never breaks."

"Oh, well, then it ..."

"Your phone", I continue, "has a life expectancy of three to five years, but this will be here on judgement day. It'll still be taking calls from dumb users, too".

Geek is momentarily stumped. He manages to recollect his thoughts. The phone rings. "See what I mean?", I say, lifting the receiver.

"My PC's crashed again. It does it every time I try to access my network disk", a user sobs dejectedly.

"Ah," I say, flicking up today's excuse on the calendar. "That'll be TRANSIENT NODE DUPLICATION."

"Huh?"

"Well, your machine's crashing because it's seeing duplicate files on the network file server and on your machine".

"Oh. What do I do?"

"Well, your best bet is to just login to the file server and do a remove-rename."

"Oh. How?"

"Do an rm -rf. Which means remove minus rename files. Any non-duplicates won't be renamed."

"Oh. OK, thanks".

"That's OK," I hang up. Geek is still here. "I'm writing a program ...", he retries.

"... to poll the printers", I finish.

"Yes".

"MY printers", I state.

"Ah ... yes".

"Why?"

"Well, I thought that I could poll them every second to see what jobs they were printing and how fast their throughput was".

"Why?"

"To see if there are any network bottlenecks ..."

"Like, for example, a bottleneck caused by a printer having to respond to an 'intelligent' poll once every second?"

"Oh. I hadn't thought of that being a problem".

"No, I didn't think you had", I say, changing the stairwell temperature to zero and cranking up the humidity. "But you've been running your program on the system already, haven't you?"

"Well, maybe once or twice".

"No, more like ..." (I count the red dots showing on the print queue monitor) "17 times by my count. You talk to a printer with a poorly parameterised SNMP message, it doesn't answer you, so you go and run it again on a different printer".

"I ... well, I might have done ..."

"Now MY problem is this: who should I choose to pass YOUR problem on to? Maybe my borderline psychotic trainee, who has been taught to hate unnecessary traffic more than he hates re-runs of Emmerdale Farm? Or perhaps to the programmers who hate cowboys more than they hate working when the pub's open? I tell you what, I'll ask them both".

He's made it out of the room and is planning that six-month holiday in Spain before I've even managed to lift the phone off the hook.

I watch the monitor as he rockets to the stairs to make clean his getaway. Sadly, an amount of condensation has built up on the lino floors of the now chilly stairwell and he slips, bumps and rolls down a couple of floors on his way out of the building, knocking down a group of salivating bean-counters hungry to get back to their sums.

As he limps his way out of the building a thought occurs to me: you just can't plan job satisfaction like this. Well, I guess you can really ...

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### **The Bastard Operator From Hell gives a helpless salesman a run for his money ...**

So I'm sitting in the office when I get a call from a salesman trying to flog me some ATM kit. He got my name from one of those magazine 'free subscription' forms a couple of months ago, which contains information inaccurate by a factor of 10, (except the 'Spending Authority' which I inflated by a factor of 100). A little white lie never hurt anyone and periodically dispels the rumour that there's no such thing as a free lunch.

I mentally switch to junket-mode, and tell him it's the technical manager he wants to speak to and can he hold. Two seconds later he's talking to my party-stopping imitation of one of our better-known technical managers.

"I'd like to come and meet with you to discuss a future-proofed network solution, if that's at all possible", he gushes.

The last thing I want him to do is come to the office and ask around for "the technical manager", so I go for the quick junket.

"Well," I say, "I'm a little tied up with some equipment reviews this week".

He's pausing a little too long for my liking. This probably means he isn't fully committed to crowbarring open the expense account.

I turn up the heat a little.

"Then I've a budgeting meeting next week to earmark spending in the next quarter, so I'll be busy preparing for that as well".

He smells dosh and goes for it.

"Tell you what - how about meeting for lunch - you've got to eat, right? No obligation, I'll just outline our products and I'm sure you'll see the advantages for yourself".

"Well ...", I stall.

"Luigi's, 12 on Thursday?"

"I, ah ...", I burble, playing hard-to-bribe.

"OK, I'll make the reservations", he closes, like a true sales champ.

I get into our electronic meeting planner with the manager's password (his wife's name - I mean, if they're not going to try to be secure ...) and make the entry for Luigi's. I make sure to select 'Hide Appts' option, as three can be a crowd.

Thursday rolls around and I show up at the bar at 11.30am and work my way through 'imported spirits' while the tab's open. By the time the sales guy gets there, I am, as we in the Ethernet trade say, in a promiscuous mode. I will buy anything. Or at least I would if I had any money. Which I don't. However, I do have several of the manager's business cards and a fairly acceptable version of his signature down pat.

The next three hours whirl by as I look through several catalogues of shiny, beta-tested, 'top-of-the-line' hardware, drooling as only a technical manager can, and dropping comments like: "nice lights". By about 3pm I feel it's time for the stress period, so I tell him that there is no networking budget for the year as I spent it all in advance last year.

He starts crying in an attempt to make me feel guilty. I pretend to fold and tell him to order me a truckload of goods which I'll fake as last year's order.

"Will it work?", he sniffs.

"Of course ...", I say. "Now, you go and clean up, you're a little bit of a mess".

He exits for the bathroom, and I quickly check his wallet. There's about £70, so I remove about £40 of it - I don't want to leave him totally broke. While I'm at it, I remove his last payment method by jiggling my trusty permanent magnet around the magstripe on his credit cards, then make my way to the bar to order another drink.

I talk to the barman till the sales guy returns to the table.

"Well", I say. "I have to get back to the office".

He eyes me suspiciously.

"Tell you what", I say. "How about I sign an order form and you can fill it in back at your office?"

A salesman's dream.

Just time to whizz through the manager's signature, pocket the dosh and I'm halfway back to work as the police roar by on their way to Luigi's.

Obviously their treatment of defaulting clients hasn't changed recently. With any luck, it'll just be the one kneecap - unless, of course, the chef's throwing arm is back in ...

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### **The Bastard Operator From Hell brings his boss crashing down with a little bribe ...**

It's a quiet morning recording calls to the medical officer when I get a call from reception asking where I want some new equipment delivered.

It takes me a couple of seconds to remember the meeting with the salesman in Luigi's and a few more seconds to contemplate the talking necessary to get the ATM guy out of Luigi's when he didn't have any money. Mind you, his two front teeth were gold-capped, so perhaps they worked something out. Or possibly pried something out ...

This probably means that my boss now owns some extremely dodgy hardware that's likely to destroy anything it's placed into.

As I have no idea what's been ordered, I ask them to send it all up to the boss.

"There's quite a lot of it ...", security informs me.

So it was both teeth then ...

"... would take up the whole of the lift, I'd guess".

And perhaps some jewellery ... retrieved post-amputation ...

I tell them to send, then prepare to meet my boss's doom.

Five minutes later the goods lift wheezes up with hundreds of shiny boxes of various sizes.

The boss looks confused. With a budget that would run to a couple of packets of networked crisps, he's a little concerned by the arrival of lots of shiny new kit. Especially as he's the only one with spending authority.

I wait till he gets the invoice with attached order. From his expression he has, as we in the trade say, rapidly downloaded some brownware.

"There must be some mistake!", he bumbles, just as a particularly troublesome auditor enters, inventory register in hand.

"This the new stuff?", he asks.

"Apparently so," I say. "But haven't we run out of money?"

"We have!" the boss bleats.

"Then why", I ask, pointing to 'his' signature, "did you order it?"

"I didn't!" he backpedals, at 28.8bps [backpedals per second].

A crowd has gathered, so I appeal for calm. "And after you turned down the request for better air conditioning too!"

Mumbles of dissent indicate the level of support the boss can expect at this stage. (A large number multiplied by nil.) This hostile audience isn't going to be receptive to denials, especially after the past years' weather extremes.

His razor-sharp vision spots a saving straw: "hey! this order is six months old. I wasn't even here then!", he cries. "Pre-dating orders to escape the Inventory System!", I cry.

Brown-nosing auditor's eyes light up like a Christmas tree as he contemplates the kudos from discovering this fraud.

"But ... I ...", the boss pleads.

I spot a box and wind the heat up a little.

"Hmmm. ATM cards for XT compatibles. How useful".

The dissent grows in volume. The boss gives up all pretence of innocence and tries for a plea bargain.

"We have a lot of legacy equipment!", he gasps.

"The card could run DOS faster!"

He's completely cornered with no escape. I know it, he knows it. The staff know it.

"What on earth is that?", I ask, pointing at the back of the goods lift.

The boss rushes in, hoping to disguise further implication.

"What?", he asks as I catch up.

"Oh nothing, just all this. The auditor, the staff, the useless kit. Everything. It's not good for a career man you know".

"But I ..."

"I mean when *your boss* finds out about this ..."

With his vocabulary bucket empty, the boss just stands there.

"Unless, of course, it were to all just simply go away ..."

A gleam of hope registers.

"Away?"

"Like a bad dream".

"How?"

"Well, you give me the invoice then sign this Course Approval Form".

He examines the form:

"But it's a two week course in the States on basic networking. You know all that stuff!"

"Then I'll have lots of time to revise, won't I?"

"But ..."

"Oh. Isn't that a Commodore 64 ATM card?"

"All right, all right!"

He autographs my form and we exit. I put all the kit back into the lift, walk back to my room and give reception a ring.

"Something's wrong with the lift", I say, as I use its service console to wind the acceleration way past the red line.

Popping back to the lift, I see that the auditor is not letting go on this one.

"You think that's bad", I say. "You should see everything at reception!"

The emergency stop goes off with a click as he goes to investigate.

Exactly 23 seconds later the building resounds with the impact of a fully laden goods lift striking the bottom of Basement Two at high speed.

As the ambulance siren approaches, I start looking through travel brochures for good places in the States to do my "revision" and ring corporate insurance about all that top-of-the-line equipment that just got destroyed ...

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**The Bastard Operator From Hell makes sure everyone else feels the heat ...**

I'm sitting in my office listening to my personal stereo when a co-'worker' from a few offices along pops into my doorway.

"Mmm?" I say, looking up.

"Ah. Could you wind your stereo down a couple of decibels - I'm trying to get some work done and it's difficult to concentrate."

Without thinking, I reach for my soldering iron and flick it to 'paint-strip'. I pause mid-'scorched earth policy' and reconsider. He's new, he deserves a chance.

"Sorry", I say, seeing what it feels like, while turning the volume from 11 to 2.

He wanders off happily to the astonishment of the others in the department who have already rung personnel to advise them of the vacancy.

The Boss pops in to make sure that I'm really in the office and has a look around. As he exits I notice a hint of a smile on his face.

Five minutes later he's back asking me to help him install the back-up program on his laptop. For some reason, instead of copying the DELETE.EXE file to BACKUP.EXE I actually load the backup software ...

Something's wrong, I'm sure of it now. I call my fiend-like pimply-faced young assistant over and ask him how he is.

He tells me that today he's solved a couple of users' problems and helped repatch an accountant's machine after a move.

Now I'm worried. Something's definitely wrong! He used the 'a' word (rather than bean-counter).

The next day dawns and I start out with a couple of random telephone repatches, but my heart's not in it. By mid-afternoon I've patched them back and apologised for the inconvenience. The boss is still smiling.

I've been careful and not eaten anything, so it's something else. Something insidious. After a long battle with my conscience, I look into the recent purchases authorised by the boss, telling myself I'm doing it to check that all the orders total-up properly.

I find what I think I'm looking for in the form of 10 'ultra-positive' ionisers recently installed into the air conditioning system. I can't yet bring myself to do anything about it, so I stand in the printer room, air-conditioning off and laser printers full-on. Half an hour later I'm almost normal. I break for home to make my plans.

Next morning I rise early and slip into work unnoticed in half-scuba paraphernalia.

First stop, the air conditioning tower on the roof. I locate the offending units and reprogram them repeatedly with a claw hammer.

Next stop, the CEO's office with a similar ioniser of my own design. I hide it away then wander down to the telephone operator's room, divert her line directly to the CEO, then lock-out her

console.

Down in the comms room I fashion a trip-wire out of the power cables to the main database applications and network servers.

Back in my office, windows open, I await the start of work. Nothing happens till 9:45 when the CEO, after 15 minutes of phone calls and exposure to my positive ion generator, calls the boss. I watch and call him immediately the boss hangs up.

"THIS IS NOT THE OPERATOR!" he shouts.

"Yes sir, I know that", I say, all kindness and understanding. "I just noticed that your phone seems to be receiving all the calls for the telephone operator and her console appears to be locked. She's been acting a bit strangely the last couple of days - well, as a matter of fact we all have I suppose. Now I'll pop into the comms ..."

The boss, in panic mode, sweeps through my room and rams the comms door open, ripping the power cables from the servers.

I flip a quick cheesy grin at the boss as he looks in horror at what he's just done.

"Home Team ONE, Your Future Job Prospects, NIL", I call out with my finger on the mute button.

"Oh dear", I utter into the unmuted phone. "The boss has just had a little accident ..."

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### **The Bastard Operator From Hell won't stand for poseurs in posh cars ...**

I'm in the workshop when the boss comes in with a perplexed look on his face. Discarding the thought that he might have found a higher meaning to life than taking the world record for impersonating a paper-weight, I decide to see what's on his mind.

"Is there a problem?" I ask, appearing concerned with his welfare.

"Well ... no. No problem. Just having some trouble with my car as it happens".

"The royal blue monster in the basement? Not starting then?" I prompt.

"No, no, starts well, runs well. Too well in fact. That's the problem".

Knowing what's coming, I prompt yet again. "Too Well?"

"I got another speeding ticket this morning".

"Really? How many's that in total then?"

"Three. But the strange thing is, the car was on Cruise Control and well under the speed limit. Yet when I looked at the speedo later on, I was way over the limit".

"Really?"

"Yes. But the really strange thing is that the radar detector noticed nothing".

"Well, the police do switch bands from time to time to defeat the detectors", I say, trying to ease his curiosity.

"But I've only had it a week! If I didn't know better, I'd swear the car picks the worst time to accelerate. As if cruise control and the radar detector are working in cahoots!"

"Out of the mouths of babes ..." I mutter.

"Pardon?"

"I said, the police must be hiding out of the way".

"Oh".

He wanders off contemplating life without a licence while I pop down to the basement and swap my recently created radar peripheral into the pimply-faced-youth's car. He's been getting complacent recently, so it'll do him good to get a small reminder of what life on the edge means.

With that little trick nicely transferred to the next recipient, I head back to the lift. I am suddenly assailed by twin-tone air horns at close proximity. Behind me, a sporty red convertible and owner are impatiently awaiting my progress. The name on the car park plaque is transferred to long-term memory in an instant.

Back in the office, I realise I've been neglecting the education of the PFY and decide to rectify this forthwith. I recount to the PFY the events in the basement concerning the rather too impatient sales manager in the sporty convertible.

"Shall we disconnect his line?" The PFY asks, keenly interested.

"No, no", I reply. "This is a special case calling for a special measure. Grab that book over there".

"The one with the metal covers?"

"That's the one".

He grabs the book, lifts it and falls to the floor. Seconds later he regains consciousness.

"What happened?" he asks in a daze.

"The oldest trick in the book. 'Which book?' you ask ... the Bastard Operator Guide. The Tome of Hell".

"But what happened?"

"When you picked the book up, the microswitch in the basement activated the chunky inverter which supplies a healthy dose of voltage to the covers. You can't be too careful with the Book".

"Oh".

He's not happy, but good education has never been cheap.

"OK", I say. "Grab some rubber gloves and turn to page 43, bottom paragraph".

"This it? About Internet news?" he asks.

"The very one. Now, perhaps you can help me compose the message that our friend will be sending to a large number of sex-based newsgroups. What sort of perversion will he be interested about in hearing from people?"

Five minutes later we have a virtual masterpiece, guaranteed to appeal to a large number of the strangest people on the net.

"Shall I post it now?" the PFY asks.

"Not quite yet. You realise that this is going to generate an enormous amount of e-mail that will flood the server, causing the system administrator, a man with all the discretion of a loud hailer, to investigate?"

"You mean he'll tell?"

"We can't rely on that. Make the return address the head telephonist. It'll be round the building before someone has the guts to tell him!"

"You really are a complete bastard!"

"In the flesh, on the keyboard, and wading through people's personal lives!" I reply, with a measure of pride.

Later that day, I pop down to the basement to watch a figure emerge from the lift and slink to the little red convertible. From the look on his face, the propositions haven't only come from external sources ...

As he rockets off for a long memory-obscuring holiday, I head back to my office to finish the day's labour, pausing but momentarily to drop his sump plug into the rubbish bin ...

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### **The Bastard Operator From Hell experiences his very own Black Wednesday ...**

It's a fateful Wednesday when I'm called into the boss's office for some important news. Present are a technical manager and the department's personnel manager.

A collection of three like-minded peers one might say - or five, if we were to count the paperweight and rubbish bin, which do more work and provide far more value for money to the company.

"We've, err ... decided not to renew your contract", the boss blurts out after a couple of seconds of

tense silence.

The technical manager and personnel manager have suddenly found interesting things to look at on the roof and floor. Meantime the boss, by the looks of it, is making an attempt at the world mass-sweating award. He's expecting the worst, so I let him have it.

"Okay", I say quietly. "I leave four weeks from tomorrow, I believe".

"Ah, well, we've decided to pay you off for the last four weeks of your contract", the boss fawns.

"In fact, you can leave right now if you like. Actually", he blurts, "we'd prefer it".

"Sure", I say. "I'll just get my things and be off then".

"Ah, we've had security do that just now", the boss says, waiting for the eruption. "There's a box outside".

"Okay then, I'll see you around", I say, step outside and grab my belongings.

In the lift on the way down the pimply-faced-youth is astounded.

"What are you going to do?", he asks, shocked.

"Me? Take a holiday, read some books, no plans really".

"No, I mean about being let go".

"Oh that! Nothing really. I'm sure you'll cope without me".

A grin slips across his face as he contemplates the future.

"I'll see what I can do ..."

Three days later the phone rings. It's the boss.

"Ah, just ringing to see if you could take your contract back", he grovels.

"Why, surely my trainee's doing well?"

"Ah no, not really".

"Strange, I taught him everything I know", I reply, keeping the ball rolling.

"Yes, that's what we were afraid of".

"Pardon?"

"I don't know. He just keeps making mistakes. At least he says they're mistakes".

"What sort of mistakes?"

"All sorts! The other day he 'repaired' an 'unusual' temperature control setting on a probe in the boardroom and boiled the CEO's tropical fish in their tank; his 'Lift Maintenance' had myself and one of the managers riding between floors three and four over the lunch hour; the share-price monitor only picks up Dutch porn channels; the security doors keep locking people out of the toilets - except on one occasion when it locked a particularly nervous secretary in - and one of the board member's hearing aids fed back so badly when he went near the sixth floor comms room he was clinically deaf for four days afterwards!"

"Well networking is a touchy business and he is still learning I guess".

"Yes, yes, but can you come back and fix things? The network server passwords expire every day and the minimum password length increases with it. By the end of the week it'll be 15 letters, and you know what the big boss will say about typing his initials five times".

"Well, I don't know ...", I say, holding out for the inevitable.

"An extra £5,000 a year?"

"Ten?"

"Okay, ten!"

"And I never did like that personal liability clause".

"IT'S NEVER STOPPED YOU BEFORE!"

"True, but it gets to you after a while ..."

"All right, all right, it's a deal. When can you start?"

A day later the status quo is restored. The PFY gives me a quick run-down on what happened in my absence. Apparently the turning point was after an accident on the mezzanine escalator involving the boss's wife, his surprise birthday cake, the CEO's suit and a sudden change of escalator speed. An extraordinary coincidence ...

The phone rings and, as I'm in such a good mood, I pick it up.

"Is that the networks guy?" a voice asks.

"Yes ..."

"I've got a problem with this new machine and the network".

"A pentium?" I guess randomly.

"Yeah".

"Uh-huh. The manufacturer faxed us about an electrostatic build-up problem".

"Errr?"

"To fix it, just slide the lid open ..."

"Okey dokey".

"Pull the network card out ..."

"Yup".

"... and put tin foil along the edge connector to ground static charges".

"Oh. Okay".

"Now plug the card in and switch her on".

"Okay. I'm switching it".

BANG!

"Agghhh...!"

<Click>

It's funny how you always miss the good times ...

---

### **The Bastard Operator From Hell and partner take revenge for stolen comms space ...**

"There he goes ..." the Pimple-Faced-Youth mutters as the department's latest programmer sneaks out of his room and goes off home. The poor guy's got a persecution complex which has absolutely nothing to do with his office being constructed from an area stolen from the comms room by the bosses.

Sadly, I didn't get to the plans before they left the drafting machine, but the PFY did manage to 'recalibrate' the builders levels and cable detectors. Funny how the walls seem to lean inwards and every time the air conditioner comes on the door handle heats up.

In the spirit of re-use, the boss had trolled all the offices for unused furniture prior to the programmer's arrival. From us he scored the drawers of death. Previously used to hold the bean-counter back-ups, the drawers of death look like an ordinary set of drawers, and even behave like an ordinary set of drawers. Until they're closed.

That triggers a five second hummm. Moments later, the programmer finds all his work for the day has been mysteriously wiped out; amazing how small you can make a bulk eraser ...

The remote control on his gas-operated chair was the PFY's idea. The chair plummets to the bottom of its movement at irregular intervals, and the poor guy has since developed a bit of a limp. Probably a lumbar problem.

The boss realises something's happening - as he should, considering he masterminded the room seizure. I'm sure he thinks of that every time he changes the bandage on that nasty doorknob shaped burn on the palm of his hand ...

After a heart to heart session the programmer had with the boss, that the PFY and I accidentally overheard because of the microphone pickup inadvertently cabled onto the redundant UTP connection, the programmer asks us to stop by, obviously believing the scandalous mistruths passed to him by a soon-to-be ex-boss ...

"I hear you're responsible for all this", he says.

"For?" I ask innocently.

"These annoyances! And I want them stopped. I'm working on an important project and I will not tolerate interference".

I'm not a hardline fan, and by the looks of it neither is the PFY.

"Do you know how much I get paid?" he continues.

"Not a clue", I lie, so that I don't have to pretend not to be annoyed that he's earning more than the PFY and I put together.

"But I'll tell you what - you share your good fortune with us and we'll see what we can do. A couple of hundred quid a week, each. Call it Comms Room Rental",

"NEVER!"

Meeting at a close, the PFY and I wander off. Two days later, following a minor first caused by some faulty wiring on his desk lamp (I blame cheap imports), we're invited back.

A generous donation to the Operators' Christmas fund later, we return to our office.

Sometime later, the programmer again asks me and the PFY to stop by his office. He has that smug look that can only mean some form of trouble is brewing.

"I'd, ah, like my money back please", he says, striving to appear nonchalant.

"Sorry", I counter, just as calmly. "It's been invested in operational expenses."

"Well, perhaps you can uninvest it. Unless of course you wish this to appear on the CEO's desk".

He clicks on an icon on his screen and a recording, obviously made by his laptop's vidcam attachment, pops up on the screen. A recording of our last encounter, sound and all.

He smiles.

I smile back. And nod to the PFY.

One standard issue, trip-on-the-floor-mat later, the programmer's machine lays in ruins on the floor, with a large heel mark decorating the hard drive.

"Woopsy", the PFY gasps. "Must have low blood sugar or something".

"A good attempt", he sneers. "But not good enough. I have back-up tapes".

"I see. Aren't you a little concerned that I'll get to the tapes somehow?" I inquire, trying to sniff out their location.

He chuckles.

"Not in the slightest. Not when they're safely locked away".

>SLAM!<

A five-second hum and chuckle later the PFY and I are heading back to our office to resume normal life.

"Shall I crank up the voltage on the doorknob?" the PFY asks.

"All the way! Oh, and that desk lamp looks a little dim while you're at it ..."

With initiative like that, he's bound to go places ...

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### **The Bastard Operator From Hell verges on the edge of insanity but the PFY steps in ...**

It's a quiet day in my office when the boss trundles in with a bundle of official looking papers, which can only mean one thing - he's trying to get rid of me again. A great personal tragedy is about to occur. To him.

"Simon, glad I caught you!"

Considering it's 2.30pm on pay day and a mass of expensive hardware that would fit rather well into my briefcase has just gone missing, his surprise and gladness are faked.

He's trying to cover up an ulterior motive.

"I've just had a directive from the top about staff appraisals. The Big, Big Boss wants us all to go through personal interviews this year prior to any increases ..."

Dangling the 'increase' carrot has been used before, and usually precedes an attempt at a monumental shafting. However, a raise is a raise, so I just nod.

The boss takes strength from getting this far and continues.

"Yours, if it's OK, is tomorrow at 10am. Could you make that?" he says, all sugar and spice.

"Of course I could", I reply, smiling with Bambi-like innocence.

The boss thanks me and wanders off, barely suppressing a smug grin. Yep, it's a shafting all right ...

Next morning dawns and I'm in at 9am for a change, watching the entranceway.

Time ticks by and it gets to 9.48 when my suspicions are proved. A pale, emaciated figure, sporting a thoughtful beard, glasses and medical issue white-collar shirt with non-threatening tie, wanders in.

A plain-clothes psychologist if I am not very much mistaken.

I get the PFY over for a quick gander. He nods. Not a word is spoken as he logs into the various control systems, shaking his head.

At the interview, it's the usual psych-type thing, Ink Blots, stories about childhood, recent dreams, and so on.

I decide to go for the high score, and find lots of witches and murderesses in the ink blots, 'remember' some disturbing incidents from my childhood, and tell him that all my recent dreams involve axes and guns and things.

An hour later, he's appearing calm and smiling a lot, but his eyes never leave me for a second.

I smile back.

"Coffee?" I ask.

Afraid to refuse, he nods.

Barely a minute later the PFY brings some coffee in and raises an eyebrow to see how it's going. I keep smiling to maintain my power base.

A couple of security guys pop in mid-coffee and I realise it's the full 101 per cent shafting and they're not only trying to lose me, they're trying to have me committed at the same time - probably to secure the PFY's loyalty in my absence...

It looks like speech time, by the expression on psych-guy's face.

"Simon, I find you to be what we clinically refer to as a sociopath. You have some deep-set adjustment problems that I, as a government appointed health counsellor ..."

Government? The Bastards!

"... am duty-bound to relate to the proper authority, as I feel you may pose a danger to yourself and to others".

He's quick isn't he?

He's also starting to look a bit uncomfortable, which is not surprising considering the strength of the laxative that the PFY put in his drink, but there you go.

Losing his great mental struggle to stay and see this out, he breaks for the toilets, only, if I'm not

mistaken, to find them locked.

Strange that, the only key that locks them is the building master, and that's kept in the security's hi-tech safe (three turns to 37, two turns to 12, one turn to 45) which no-one has the combination to.

While he's hitting the stairwell at a run, the boss comes in and grabs my psychiatric evaluation with an evil grin. He wanders back with me to the office to gloat, but I'm too busy watching the closed-circuit TV screen over his shoulder to pay much attention. Psych-guy makes for the quickest source of toileting in a building like ours - the floor below.

It too is strangely locked ....

The door on the floor below that, which doesn't have a lock, is blocked by eight large boxes containing 28-inch boardroom-style video monitors which weigh about a ton each and require a trolley to move ...

He knows he's not going to make it back up the stairs in time, but then he notices a shining beacon presenting itself to him in the form of a rubbish bin at the cafeteria freight entrance.

His relief is immense, but not shared by the cafeteria storeperson who emerges at a bad time, nor by the boss when my moral obligation prompts me to point out the CCTV screen to him.

"Ahem. So good to have a profile of your employees done by a fellow of such discretion and taste", I chirp, as I nudge my profile from his hands into the bin that it can now call home.

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### **The Bastard Operator From Hell sings tunes to melt his boss's ears ...**

The boss has become a liability. Sad, but true. Still, it's all part of the Pimpily-Faced-Youth's training, so it has to be done.

He knows something is up, and is trying to ingratiate himself with me by asking for technical advice all the time and thanking me profusely for it. In other words, sucking up.

On the ingratiation scales, it's right up there with hitting an alligator's snout with a stick to make it friendlier. If I'd wanted work, I'd have left the phone on the hook in the first place.

The final snout-rap came when he brought his home stereo in for some installation advice. I don't know why, but he seems to believe that simply because I do some work at the nuts and bolts end of the computing spectrum, I'm bound to know about everything from the rating of the third fuse to how to program a Beta video to get Coronation Street in the least amount of tape.

I give it a quick once-over to see what's wrong with it, noticing almost immediately that the tape IN and OUT leads were the wrong way round.

"So what's the problem?" I ask.

"It's the tape," he whines. "It stopped working after we moved the stereo into the drawing room. If

you turn the volume all the way up, you can just hear the sound of the tape".

"Hmm", I murmur thoughtfully. "We'll probably need the speakers to get the complete picture".

"I'll get them at lunchtime", he enthuses.

Three hours later we have the little beauties on the desk. I jam the overload cutouts closed while the PFY puts the bags of isopropyl alcohol and ignition circuits into them. Half an hour later we have a masterpiece and sneak off into hiding, priming the halon system before we go.

Fifteen minutes after that we're playing poker in the storeroom when we hear the first strains of a Neil Diamond number thumping. I look to the PFY.

"The loudness switch should do it", he murmurs, taking his electrical apprenticeship quite seriously.

Scant seconds later there is a >Crump!< from the control room as Neil fires up not only a guitar solo, but also a very expensive pair of speakers.

The PFY and I can hear the beeping of the Halon warning, which means that the boss has to make a decision - save the speakers and be suffocated, or watch them burn and live.

The silencing on the warning tells us that the boss has subscribed to the motto "Choose Life".

We give him a couple of minutes of respectful silence then grab some equipment and wander back, pausing only to knock over a huge box of thinwire terminator.

"Woopsy," the PFY mutters. "We'd better pick those up ... later".

By the time we locate him, the boss is sobbing into an oxygen mask in the sick bay as he recounts the horror of it all.

"It just caught fire", he bleats, "and then those job sheets caught light, then those folders, then the wooden door wedges stacked on top of them like kindling, then ..."

A thought crosses his mind, watches for traffic, and seeing none, crosses back. He stares at us both.

"You bastard!" he utters in a state of shock.

The PFY and I exchange shocked glances.

"We were in the store!" I cry, lamb-like innocence.

Tossing the mask aside, he makes a break to verify this.

And that's not the only break of the day. An arm and a clavicle follow in short order as he rockets across the floor on terminator rollers into the poorly loaded paper shelves, which promptly fall on him.

Nasty. We tell the officer that when he comes to investigate. (The boss's new corporate policy requires all incidents to be reported to the police.) Fitting that he should be a test (and basket) case. The officer sadly takes down the details, then goes to get a statement from the boss. Two hours later

he discards the pages of notes in favour of a "Workplace Accident" verdict and leaves with an expensive speakerless stereo that we had no need for. On the way out he pauses.

"You're a computing guy?" the Cop asks me.

"Yep", I reply, nodding.

"You know anything about Beta videos? My wife likes ..."

Hanging's too good for 'em ...

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### **The Bastard Operator From Hell counts on the fact that managers never remember ...**

It's quarterly budget time again and I'm trying to convince the managers that we should upgrade the thin wire Ethernet in one of our remote offices. An hour into the meeting the conversation goes something like ...

Manager 1: "So basically you're saying that 10 million of these 'bit' things EVERY SECOND isn't fast enough?"

Me: "No, not really."

Manager 2: "He's right you know, I've been to that office, the network speed is abysmal!"

Manager 1: "It just doesn't seem possible! Hell, I can't even manage TEN bits of stuff a second."

Me: "That doesn't surprise me."

Manager: "Pardon?"

Me: "I said the numbers really surprise me. Too, I mean..."

Manager 1: "Oh."

Me: "You see, when my predecessor put that net in, he did it on the cheap. All the devices were connected to the same piece of net. It's like everyone using the same road to get to work."

Manager 1: "But we paid a PREMIUM for that network!"

Me: "Four years ago. Cabling was more expensive then. And...."

Manager 1: "And?"

Me: "And the original spec was for individual segments."

Manager 1: "So?"

Me: "Well basically, everyone was supposed to have their own network 'road'."

Manager 2: "What happened?"

Me: "Well, it was probably a combination of financial and distribution considerations."

Manager 2: "Meaning?"

Me: "He daisy-chained one segment through all of the offices, sold the remaining cable off, and charged you through the nose for labour."

Manager 1: "Really?"

Me: "Yes, it happens with the less reputable network engineers."

Manager 1: "I find this all extremely hard to believe. There must be some mistake. He assured me that it had been done."

Me: "Ah, he probably assured you that YOU had been done."

Manager 1: "No! I'm sure he wouldn't have taken advantage!"

Me: "I see. Tell me, what money was he earning back then?"

Manager 1: "Seven fifty an hour."

Me: "And the car he drove?"

Manager 1: "Mercedes convertible."

Me: "And how did he dress?"

Manager 1: "Nicely - Italian suits."

Me: "Are things becoming a little clearer?"

Manager 1: "You mean to say..."

Me: "I do."

Manager 1: "He..."

Me: "He did."

Manager 2: "How bad IS this?"

Me: "At the time it wasn't bad, but with all client server upgrades, staff are wasting valuable time waiting for networks."

Manager 3: "What should we do then?"

Me: "Well, as you see in front of you, I'm recommending UTP to the desktop, Cat 5 so that we can upgrade to ATM when it becomes a more widespread and viable technology. This will save you the expense of having to recable in a couple of years."

I pause in my delivery to let their minds recover from acronym overload.

Manager 1: "How much will it cost?"

Me: "Well, it won't be cheap. However if you look at the cost over five years, it's fairly small, if, of course, you accept that the cabling will be done out of hours by me and my pimply faced youthful assistant at the standard double-time overtime rate. We could get a contractor in, but as you can see on the paper in front of you, it would be about three times as expensive and only slightly quicker that way. And, given that we will have laid the cable and are likely to know more about it if problems occur in the future..."

Manager 2: "We get your point. Well, it seems that you've covered all aspects of the problem, I for one agree. Everyone else concur?"

Two weeks later, the PFY wanders out to the site and starts the job.

"So we change the existing UTP patch cables to a new colour, drop some Cat 5 off-cuts on the floor and kick a hole in the plasterboard every few offices or so?" he asks.

"Yup! For a week or two."

"Won't someone find out?"

"Well, they WOULD if there was any documentation saying that there was Cat-5 to the desktop here already, but unfortunately that information accidentally fell in the shredder this morning," I reply.

"So we really ARE just changing the patch cables to a new colour?"

"Yup!"

"How's that going to improve performance?"

"It's not. But switching off the traffic generator in the 2nd floor comms cupboard which has been increasing its traffic by one per cent a week since the beginning of the year will."

"So we're just screwing them for lots of labour."

"And those drums of premium Cat-5 which have excellent re-sale value."

"You bastard!"

"Hey! I was this close to charging them for new network cards too, but I relented."

"So that stuff about your predecessor was all lies?"

"No. He did all that, just to some of the other offices. I

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## **The Bastard Operator From Hell senses something fishy and casts his net ...**

Something's a little fishy in the department. I recognise the signs when I reach my floor - the air of restrained anticipation.

First stop, my internal mail slot - bombshells usually get placed there by the boss prior to him scuttling to the relative safety of his office. Naivety knows no bounds.

Sure enough, there's a bombshell measuring on the red-tape Richter scale.

In an effort to standardise a coherent future direction, the bosses have decided to appoint a 'Director of Future Planning'. Couldn't be fishier if it came with tartare sauce.

Sure enough Jeremy, the appointee, has all the initiative and forward thinking of wheel-clamps, and was recently responsible for purchasing 10 multi-mode analogue recording devices for a bargain price of £6,000. The most expensive box of pencils in the history of the company ...

Unless I'm very much mistaken this is yet another salvo in the 'bean counters versus techies' war. I read further and discover that all purchases have to be approved by the DFP to ensure that they conform to the direction the company has chosen for its future ...

I get two weeks' respite before the you-know-what hits the fan with a knock at my door. Jeremy enters.

"Ah, Simon, just a couple of points," he says. "This wireless LAN stuff. You realise that we're not equipped to deal with this just yet?"

"In what way?" I ask. "Not having several open-plan work areas that are hell to cable - you know, like the WP pool, the PR offices - or not having a single free AUI connector unless we unplug the unused terminal servers?"

"Oh. Ah. Well, no, not that exactly, it's just that according to my calculations ..."

He bashes a couple of figures into his personal organiser, an item that appears to have been distributed far and wide amongst the upper echelons, a move no-doubt designed to cover up for the stupidity of a prior purchase.

"... we would be spending almost £300 per multi-peater more than we need to if we buy from our current supplier."

"Ah. Our current supplier of ... analogue recording devices?" I ask.

He pretends to ignore me. "No, our current supplier of personal organisers. And we have the added bonus of being able to transmit and receive information from the organisers through them which is not available on any other equipment."

He toddles off leaving me feeling that the outcome was: "Future Planning, 1, Simon, nil", so quick

as I can, I bash out a memo about the potential security implications of uploads and downloads taking place from these devices. There's a rumour of a takeover flying about and the last thing we want is sensitive data being intercepted.

My warnings fall on deaf ears, the marketing has already been done in secret and accepted as gospel. Not good.

The kit duly arrives and I reluctantly install it. However, the manual is most instructive on the upload and download features, and to remain an interested party, I read it ...

A week later I'm listening to a boardroom conversation, as is my wont. It really was an amazing coincidence that a couple of highly sensitive microphones ended up being placed near the panel when the room was recabled recently.

"Well, quite frankly, I'm tired of it all," a manager whines.

"Why?" Jeremy asks, a little stress registering on my accompanying voice analysis software.

"The bloody thing keeps turning itself on in the middle of the night and ringing an alert for my wife's birthday, which was three weeks ago. I can't put it in the lounge because it switches my TV on now it's learnt the controls like you suggested. And, if that's not bad enough, it keeps switching the bloody thing off just before Inspector Morse finds out who the killer is!"

"Mine does that too," another boss adds.

"Mine added one to the street numbers of all my addresses," yet another voice announces.

"You think that's bad," another snuffles, "mine rang an alarm and displayed 'Dinner with Trudi' with three stars by her name one night when my wife was using it. I don't even know a Trudi!! But I've got plenty of time to find one now!"

"These are obviously teething problems," my ex-nemesis oozes.

"I'm sure it's just some redundant information"

I tap away at my keyboard and a chime is heard from the boardroom.

"Good Lord!" a voice exclaims. "Mines just told me to ring the doctor about the HIV results!!"

"I think we've heard enough," the CEO interrupts.

"Until further notice, we're withdrawing these devices from use. Thank you gentlemen. Jeremy - a word."

I listen on while Jeremy is promoted to another position of responsibility - head window cleaner. Only, we have contractors to do that ...

A pity really. Still, it doesn't pay to dwell.

---

## **The Bastard Operator From Hell sets about averting a company takeover bid ...**

I'm barely into work when the boss and CEO crash the door, looking worried.

"We're in trouble," the boss says.

"We're being taken over," the CEO interrupts, slipping past the boss.

"Why tell me?" I enquire, innocence oozing.

"Because you have a way of 'fixing' things ..." the boss hints.

"Routers?" I respond, all innocence.

"No. You know what I mean!"

"Networks!" I cry, happily.

The CEO starts getting agitated so I put him out of our collective misery.

"OK, who is it?"

He spits out the name of our hated rival. Later, behind closed doors, the PFY and I form a plan, then invite the boss et al back again.

"Step One: Fire the PFY!"

"How? Why?" the boss blurts.

"Embezzling something."

"If that were grounds for dismissal, you would've been ..."

A stony gaze at the boss silences him and I continue.

"Step Two: I have lunch with one of their network guys and on the way out I drop (in front of their security cameras), and then quickly hide in a suspicious manner, a data tape with their company logo on the front.

Step Three: The PFY, invaluable in the future plans of our takeover because of his intimate knowledge of the way we work, steps into a recently vacated network guy position."

"Sounds good," the boss chirps.

Three days later we're set. I'm making our company look an unattractive investment by falsifying memos about future criminal liability from defects in the furniture production line, then leaking them to the press.

Of course, no pressman worth his salt substitute would believe the memos without proof (being men of integrity), so I sacrifice a couple of bean-counter limbs for the purpose of, "Stress Testing

Production Line Furniture," ("the cause") and make sure the papers are on hand to see the ambulance being loaded.

Meantime the PFY is stepping through the entire first three chapters of the Bastard Manual, wrecking havoc all round. The oxy-acetylene in the halon cannister was a nice touch, and took out half a warehouse before they realised what had happened and switched the automatic extinguishers off. A simple typo on a refill form can make such a difference ...

His technical advice appears to be second to none judging by the continual arrival of replacement equipment and deskside fire extinguishers.

Meantime their Fire Alarms have been used more in last three days than in the previous two years and the route to and from the Fire Station has a 24-hour parking ban.

I tried calling him but due to a wiring maintenance mix-up people are too scared to answer the phones. Must be the stigma attached to electrical burns. Page 73 if memory serves me correct.

I'm continuing as normal, repatching a repeater when the boss comes to see me.

"It's about these accidents," he says.

"What accidents?" I ask

"You know what accidents. They have to stop. Why is the equipment being sent to the accounts department for testing anyway? We've got a perfectly capable testing team."

"Yeah, but they're all good sorts," I reply.

"What?! Well, I don't care, it has to stop! There are only three accountants left!"

"No ..." looking at my watch, "... there's ..."

A thud and a muffled scream from the floor above punctuate my sentence.

"... Two. I'm guessing the wardrobe and drawer unit he was looking at did not pass the 'heavy weight placed in an elevated position' test.

Speaking of heavy weights, you haven't seen the large box of full-height hard drives normally in my office have you?"

He trundles off without a word to rest in his office ...

I get to my office and the phone is ringing. One of our equipment suppliers wants a site visit with a prospective customer. What the hell, it'll kill time till the real action starts...

The phone rings and as I'm in time-kill mode, I answer it.

"My phone's broken!"

"Then how are you calling me?" I ask.

"I'm using another phone, stupid."

Stupid?!?!

"I see," I whisper, "and what was your number?"

He tells me. I look it up.

"Ah, Mr 0898"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Are you sure? I have several VERY PROGRESSIVE tapes here for you to listen to if you'd like."

"Err ... that won't be necessary."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, forget I called."

"Well I'd like to forget you called, but the only thing that makes me forget is a couple of bottles of single malt scotch. The good stuff, not that cheap crap they serve up at the bar ..."

"I'll drop them off shortly."

Ten minutes later the transaction is completed and I end the day by playing one of the tapes into his home answerphone. It was for the best, those calls were just a cry for help ...

---

### **The Bastard Operator From Hell meets an unexpected guest - the opposition's BOFH ...**

It's a calm morning network-wise when I arrive at the office to prepare for a site visit and to continue defending my company's recent bad name and business from the potential takeover.

I realise once more why I discourage site visits normally. Their only purpose is to pretend to a customer that the stuff really does work like it says in the brochure by finding a site that's worked out where the manual went wrong and fixed it.

If it wasn't for the free lunch and the chance to blackmail a good price for our next order, they'd never make the front door.

The visit should follow typical form: supplier lies to customer; I extort goods to support this flagrant misinformation; a walk-around tour; a free lunch, and promises from me to help out if they have any future difficulties.

In other words, a day that would turn Pinnochio into a kindling machine.

As 10am rolls around, I get a call from the front desk about my visitors.

A quick look at the CCTV shows me everything is as expected; our supplier with his customer. Except for one small thing; the visitor is none other than the head network guy of our rival company. Something smells a little rotten, and it's not the Danish cheese in the staff cafeteria.

I slip downstairs with the boss wondering exactly what the purpose of this visit is. Some show of strength probably, but what form this will take is unknown. Obviously a lapse in reporting on the part of the Pimply-Faced-Youth which I'll rectify with a cattle-prod at our next meeting.

The technical competence of my rival is identified when I notice his rubber-soled isolator shoes. The electric doorknob was a waste of time ...

... but then again, perhaps not, as the supplier gives himself a belt he won't remember in a hurry, along with his name and who he works for.

The opposition immediately identifies himself as a network professional by perusing the boss's swipe card PIN number, 'accidentally' shutting the boss's hand in a door - twice - then snaffling the access card while the boss is busy blubbing. Smooth - 11 seconds in total.

He flexes some more muscle by popping a couple of earth leakage detectors as he passes by some equipment. The old high-powered-transmitter-inducing-current-in-the-leakage-wire trick.

His attempts at conquering the comms room in the same manner fail dismally, though. I operate under the assumption that anyone who should be playing with electricity knows the dangers and wouldn't need safeguards anyway...

It's the price you pay for being good. And who'd lose a whole network just to save the mind of someone who's playing with something they shouldn't?

Getting to the point, my counterpart speaks in crypted 'NetSpeak'.

"What's that unit like?" he asks, gesturing at the supplier.

"A little 2400. No actually, this one's probably 300 synchronous. On a good day."

"Yeah, it was transmitting nulls earlier".

"Nothing a repeated Control-Alt-Delete wouldn't solve."

The boss returns in bandages for the free lunch. And over lunch, my counterpart and I talk turkey.

"I favour the previous configuration," my rival states.

"Yeah, a bit too much SNMP at the moment, but that's always been the case."

"Yeah, me too. So ... a reinstall of the original specs..."

Two weeks later the takeover threat is but a memory. I have a brand new Bean Counter department in the sights and am raring to go. Some of the upper middle management who favoured a protracted takeover as grounds for a pay rise took early retirement - the 40s are such a difficult time of life, especially when you find a photo of yourself in women's underwear (in the confines of a very progressive Soho club) in the top drawer of your desk.

I get a call from my counterpart on the secure line.

"All clear?" he asks.

"Yep. You?"

"Not a worry. Had to let your PFY go, you know how it is. A real pity."

"Not to worry, he's back at his desk, playing with the temperature of the fridge which is storing tomorrow's chicken lunches. I'll probably eat out..."

The world is full of networking victories - this has been one of them.

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## **A brief Bastard Net Speak glossary ...**

- 2400 - 2400 baud.
- Slow300 synchronous - so slow he needs a tow-rope.
- Previous Configuration - the way things were.
- SNMP - stupidity of non-technical manager's proposals.
- Transmitting Nulls - talking bollocks.
- Repeated Control-Alt-Delete - lots of boots - a good kicking.

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### **The Bastard Operator From Hell involves himself with the CEO's pet project ...**

The PFY and I are having a quick chuckle when the Boss is passing, so he stops in - probably to see who he should send the condolence card to.

"Is there something funny?"

"No, no, not really. It's this memo. For a minute there I thought it was a real one where you were asking for the root passwords of our machines."

"I did" he says straight-faced.

"Stop, you're killing me", I chuckle. "Why would YOU want the root password?"

"Why is irrelevant. Just do it", he snaps.

"You realise it's insecure?"

"I'll lock it in my personal document safe".

"You mean three turns clockwise to 37 ...", I say.

"... two turns back to 18 ...", the PFY chips in.

"... then back to 43", the cleaner finishes.

"Then scream in frustration and get your secretary to open it for you".

The boss does his impersonation of a stunned mullet then continues.

"Alright, I'll put a new safe in - and I WILL have those passwords", he says as he storms off.

That night we do some sneaky miniature CCTV installation in his office ...

The next day the floors groan as a huge grey monster is delivered to his offices. The boss himself supervises its placement.

"We can't see a thing", the PFY moans as the hidden camera gives us a view of the top of the boss's head.

"Not from that camera", I reply, "but from this one ..." >click< "... a full frontal!"

Sure enough, the boss's lamp-cam reveals all.

"So why did we put the camera in?", the PFY asks, perplexed.

"A decoy. The boss was bound to check the room after last time, so I wanted him to find that particular camera".

"Why?"

"Well, if you look carefully at his room, there's only one plausible place he could put the safe out of the camera's eye whilst maintaining the illusion that he knows nothing".

"Sneaky ..."

"Doubly sneaky", I add with a hint of mystery.

Pretending to fold, we give the boss the passwords, then the next day when he's checked they're legit, change them to something else. Raising the stakes, we deal ourselves into the CEO's pet video-conferencing project downstairs so the boss can't "call us urgently away" when he finds out ...

"How are things going?", the CEO asks benevolently.

"Great sir", the PFY gushes.

"We should be ready to go tomorrow", I add as I cable up the cameras to the video multiplexing unit - the device that cost a quarter of MY budget for the year - that the boss recommended after the salesman took him on a two day bender ending up in his arrest at a pub in Brighton for showing some women his rendition of Trafalgar Square's tallest monument ...

Bad thoughts aside, I run some diagnostic images through the machine and show the CEO how the pictures will look to our overseas offices.

"The images will be displayed across the screen like this," I say, "one for each person present. Sitting on a chair activates the camera".

"And this will all work straight off?" the CEO asks, barely suppressing his excitement at being on corporate TV.

"There might be a few teething problems, but I'm sure that my trainee and I will be able to go to there and sort them out. Most should go smoothly except perhaps for the Rome and Florida offices, which may have solar interference during the summer".

The CEO might smell a junket, but he's not going to risk delaying his baby. "Of course, I'll see to it that your Divisional Head is aware".

An hour later we're in the boss's office as he seethes with impotent fury.

"Oh! Did we forget to tell you about the password change? And the Video Conferencing? Take a note of that for the future", I mention to the PFY.

The boss seethes some more.

Three hours later we're knocking back a few lagers as we draw straws for vacations. I mean assignments.

Two hours after that, we're in the off-license purchasing two cases of gin which we slip into the grey monster later under the cover of darkness.

"What did we do that for?", the PFY asks.

I say nothing but jump in the air, landing heavily on the floor. A creak from the floorboards enlightens the PFY, and he joins me. Seconds later a sound not unlike a heavy safe falling through a floor greets our ears.

The next morning as we watch the boss pack up his things the PFY muses about the fickleness of life. "You know, he might've got away with it if the safe hadn't landed on the video multiplexer ..."

"Yeah," I reply, "what a terrible coincidence. It was probably the password book that broke the camel's back ..."

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**The Bastard Operator From Hell finds there are 'mistakes in training' and 'training in**

### **mistakes' ...**

I'm doing some important network response testing with the PFY when the phone rings. It's the PFY's line and it's never rung before, so he celebrates by unplugging it from the wall. While his attention is otherwise engaged, I shoot him a couple of times in the back.

Networked DOOM II is an excellent breeding ground for the Machiavelli in us all.

"That was the boss," I mention, easing the tension in the room somewhat.

"Contract Renegotiation Time," he says and trundles off to the boss's office. Five minutes later he's back with a not-too-happy expression on his face.

"Problems?"

"He doesn't believe that I've the experience to warrant an increase in my hourly rate." This, I don't like - if it can happen to him it can happen to me, and I have an irrational fear of anything that looks like the thin end of a wedge.

I'm on the phone to personnel in a flash. "What do we have to do to prove that my assistant deserves a raise?"

"Typically there's a meeting with the head of personnel, an independent expert and the candidate himself. The idea is that the candidate's networking knowledge is put to some form of test."

I arrange the test for the next day and instruct the PFY to do his homework...

The next day dawns and at 10am everyone shows up for the main event. Except for the independent expert, that is. However, he's unlikely to be heard of for another couple of hours... providing the lift maintenance contractor is as slow as usual.

I offer my services as an independent expert.

"OK, a couple of questions," I say. "Shoot," the PFY responds.

"What criteria do you use when determining whether to remove a user's files?"

"How much sleep I had the night before?"

"Fair enough. When pushing a user's machine off a desk, what should you ensure?"

"That their keyboard is below."

"Half marks. Keyboard and a valued personal possession."

"Of course."

"When should overtime be scheduled?"

"When circumstances make an operation hazardous during normal hours."

"More information?"

"When I'm in a bad mood because I've run out of money that month."

"Correct. A colleague asks for your advice purchasing a machine for their private business. What do you recommend, Macintosh or PC?"

"Neither. I'd recommend the Commodore 64 with twin tape drives that I use as a doorstop - priced at 600 quid."

"And when it failed?"

"It wouldn't."

"More information?"

"It's rigged up to catch fire when it's plugged in. I'd claim he plugged it in wrong."

"Excellent. Phones are running hot with complaints that sessions on the 4th floor NT server are being lost randomly. What is the problem most likely to be?"

"The problem, as I see it, is that the phone is on the hook."

"Correct."

Half an hour later ...

"Well I'm convinced - he has learnt a great deal."

"And I am unconvinced!" the head of personnel cries. "This trainee was brought in to address the problems of poor service and lack of accountability that were prevalent in your reign of terror. Instead of doing that you've twisted him into a nastier version of yourself!"

"Yes, good isn't he?" I comment.

"NO! And if you think, even for a moment, that I'm going to OK this .. this TRAVESTY of skills evaluation, you are sorely mistaken. He STAYS on our trainee contracting pay-scale."

It's true, there is a tool for every job. Yet it still amazes me how many 'jobs' benefit from a little tweak with the 'blackmail' tool.

"Fair enough," I say. "You're probably right. After all, he is a beginner at this sort of thing and as a trainee I suppose you could pay him less as a result of the mistakes he's bound to make. You know the sort of mistakes I mean - like e-mailing personnel's international phone logs to the CEO instead of the head of personnel. How is your daughter Sir - still working in the Cayman Islands?"

"Ah. Well, on second thoughts I can see how his skillset might be more.."

"Mistakes like accidentally misconfiguring the network back-up server to restore pictures from the directory named SMUT on a personnel machine to.. say... the directory containing the slides the CEO will be using for his next talk to the board of directors."

In the international unit of operator success, Backpedals Per Second, the head of personnel is dangerously near redlining. Half an hour and a sizeable trainee-raise later, the PFY and I are sitting back in the office.

"What should I do with these phone logs?"

"Send 'em on."

"Head of personnel?"

"HELL NO! The CEO's office - you're a trainee - mistakes happen."

Needless to say, I believe my renegotiation will slip through without a hitch.

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### **The South of France beckons for the BOFH under the guise of 'Network Professional of the Year' ...**

It's a quiet day in the office. Perhaps it's got something to do with me relocating the helpdesk to the recently-vacated Boss's office and accidentally putting an axe fifty-three times through the phone cables down that corridor. Forget using pink noise tapes for relaxation, there's nothing quite like the distant sound of phones being slammed frustratedly into cradles to help a BOFH chill out. Our telecomms system is in a shocking state; must be down to all the users taking out their anger on the handsets.

I make sure the door's closed and electrified appropriately (in case any of the braver users get the rash urge to come round in person), and settle down with my reading material.

Normally, this is the time to catch up on those Dutch magazines that were inadvertently delivered to the back door a couple of months ago - and which seem to have been delivered equally inadvertently ever since. You wouldn't believe that the same mistake could be made again and again, would you? Someone, though, seems to have found my private stash, since it appears to have grown legs. I suspect it's my PFY, as he's been walking around recently with a knowing smile on his face. He'll soon learn the perils of being nose-y when I've figured out just what to do with the electric stapler, though. Anyway, in the meantime, I'm stuck with reading networking magazines.

Pausing only to fill in a 'please send a barmy UPS salesman to see me' form in the name of the guy from accounts who cut me up in the car park this morning, I start to wade through the surprisingly tall stack of unopened networking mags. One item catches my eye, though: the Networking Professional of the Year award. I laugh inwardly - it'll probably be won by some sad anorak who spends his weekends up to his ears in UTP, spends his evenings retrieving lost files from users' PCs, and who earns crap wages and no gratitude. I read on, however: "... presented at a special ceremony at l'Hotel Ambassadeur in the south of France"

Ah, now, let's not be too hasty. There is, naturally, a lot to be said for the unsung heroes of the networking world. At least that's the line I'll use when I try to persuade the CEO to let me enter the competition.

Up in the CEO's office, the man himself stares at me glassy-eyed for about a minute. The words finally emerge in a croak. "YOU want to put in for the Network Professional of the Year?"

"That's right. Just think of the credit I'd bring to the company"

"I'm thinking of the bad publicity you'd bring to the company"

"That's not very nice!" I adopt my most aggrieved expression, combined with my most innocent tone of voice. "And after all I've done for this company, too"

"Don't you mean '\_TO\_' this company'?" The CEO looks at me and starts reading from the entry form. "Helpful to his/her superiors? You've gone through five bosses in the last year!"

"So I've had to cope with five different working methods - it's a much more demanding part to play. I think it demonstrates great flexibility."

"But you're responsible for all of them leaving!!"

"Coincidence... they all seem to remember another job offer somewhere else. Perhaps you ought to look at your working conditions and salaries", I suggest slyly.

"Perhaps I ought to consider whether I need as many support staff as I do"

Ouch. That was a little below the belt. Oh well ...

"Perhaps the Inland Revenue might find out about the secret account that was mysteriously set up on a computer outside the main system."

The CEO reddens and suddenly seems to find his blotter fascinating. He recovers slightly and reads on from my form.

"And what about this," the CEO is almost shouting now. "A good team player"?

"Yes. Naturally I'd expect my pimply faced assistant to be included in the entry. As a good team player, I'd expect members of the team to be included."

"But he's a psychopath!"

"So? Are you going to hold that against him? It's not very supportive of you. I personally think the climate in the south of France will do wonders for his temperament and the experience of going to such an event will do wonders for his social skills."

"There'll be a diplomatic incident!"

The CEO carries on reading. "Nominations for the awards must be accompanied by three signed endorsements by the nominee's colleagues." He paused; "There's no-one here who would agree to sign such a statement. They all hate you."

"So I can enter the award if I can get the form signed?"

"If you can find three of our employees who will sign it, you can enter. But I'm only saying that

because I know nobody here will sign it". He exits, laughing silently to himself.

A miracle, eh? Nothing's impossible in the world of networking, as I never tire of telling users whose hard disks have been miraculously wiped clean. After all, who said getting someone's signature on a form actually needed them to write it ...

To be continued ...

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### **It's the sweet smell of success for the Bastard Operator as he wins the day in France ...**

It's a glorious day in the south of France, especially since my room at L'Hotel Ambassadeur managed to somehow get double-booked and they upgraded to me to a suite with more rooms than I've had bosses. Getting the signatures on my entry form for Network Professional of the Year was no problem - I knew that digi-sig facility on the network fax server would be handy for something - and so here I am to pick up my award. Okay, there are half-a-dozen other finalists, but I have this suspicion that there are numerous skeletons due for synchronised cupboard exodus very shortly.

Down at the awards dinner, with the sound of an alleged 'entertainer' rambling on in the background, I get talking to a rather nice PR bimchette, who is fascinated by the modern networking methods we use.

"So you've tuned the ATM backbone to 827Mbps?"

"Only on the test network of course, we couldn't use something that fast ... err ... early in development for the real users"

"Naturally. So how do you measure the throughput?"

"Doom II between half-a-dozen SGI Challenge boxes, of course. Comes out around 45,000pps"

"45,000 packets per second doesn't sound very quick". Hang about, a PR woman who knows how fast a network should go ... scary thought.

"No, it's points per second. You don't get packets for killing things in Doom, you know.

"Oh, I see. You must have a major budget each year, too, if you've got six Challenges on your test network alone".

"Ah, well, you see, they're eventually going to the CEO's pet videoconferencing project; we bought them with the insurance money after the Pentium 75's from the first project met an accident"

"That's some difference in cost"

"Well, yes, but we have a friendly insurance company". And a rather nice home video of their board at a conference in Amsterdam ...

"Nice one. So let me guess, you've had to clock-chip the Challenges and tweak their ATM cards,

thus making them 'experimental' and giving them to you for a month or two for 'testing'".

This girl is on the ball ... I'm almost impressed.

"Well, yes, but it's a complex job so testing will take a bit more than a couple of months ... 2004 would be a good year, I reckon".

"You're a bastard, aren't you?"

Catches on quick, this one. As we're chatting, some TV personality (a contradiction in terms if ever there was one) is introduced and given a shiny gold envelope to open. This he manages without needing to read the instructions, though only just.

"And the Network Professional of the Year is ..."

Later in the "winners' enclosure" I again find myself chatting to my PR friend; it's terrible, this animal attraction I seem to have. She appears surprised at my victory.

"So how did you manage to pull that off? I must admit, I wasn't exactly expecting you to get it, given your apparently unconventional outlook on network management. Did you hack the entries computer or something?"

Hack? She must be an oldie - nobody with any self-respect would ever call themselves a hacker these days, unless they owned a seriously bad anorak. I call for more drinks (the expensive stuff, naturally - I already have the root password to the hotel's systems, not to mention the room number of the old goat from the telly who bored us so much over dinner), take a deep breath, and explain.

"No, I didn't hack ..." (it takes all my effort to say the word) "... anything". Anyways, the shortlists and stuff were all done in hardware and weren't possible to access over the hotel LAN.

"In hardware?"

"With a biro and a piece of paper. These judge types have trouble with technology"

"Ah, that hardware"

"Yup. Anyway, I didn't have to hack anything; all but one of my competitors pulled out at the last moment. Well, actually some of them didn't, if the polaroids they received in yesterday's mail are anything to go by".

"What, they were ALL having a bit on the side?"

"Two of the six were - it's a side-effect of having to spend so much time in hot countries at networking shows and conferences"

"What about the ones that weren't?"

"Simple. One of them works for the company that's sponsoring the awards, so the small print got to him before I could. Of the others, one now has a photocopy of a vehicle registration form and the other was fired inexplicably after an anonymous, untraceable phone call yesterday afternoon and had his nomination withdrawn by his now-ex-employer". I must put the PFY in for a raise - he did

that phone call business without me even asking.

"I see. What's this about a registration form?"

"Oh, just something about a vanishing company Rolls and a known black-market car trader"

"I see. You really are a bastard, aren't you?"

"Naturally. Though it's taken me a while to perfect, of course."

"So what about the one competitor who didn't withdraw?"

"Oh, I beat him fair and square; the directors' words of recommendation on my entry were far more flattering than those on his". At least they were \_after\_ the form got switched in the chief judge's briefcase on a train to Doncaster last week.

"So what's next?"

"Back to work, a nice pay rise as thanks for raising the company profile, thank the temp for keeping the users on their toes while I've been away, then the occasional after-dinner speech with a five-figure fee".

"What if someone blows the whistle?"

"Oh, I don't have to worry about that"

"Don't you?". I don't like the look in her eye, or the tone of her voice for that matter. "What would you say if I told you I taped this conversation?"

"I'd point out that the dictating gadget in your top left pocket has no record head, so you've got a blank tape. As we're on the subject, what would you say if I told you that the phone in your your room was bugged? Now what were all their names ...". I pat my pocket, and hear the reassuring rattle of microcassette-in-plastic-case.

Sense of humour failure is instant, and she turns and wanders off to sulk.

My mother was right ... you should never trust someone in PR.

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**Looking for new challenges, or just more dosh,**

**the BOFH risks it all in the agency shark pool ...**

The boss is being a little reticent about my rate so I decide to twist the knife a bit by calling up some contracting agencies. My only worry being that if I called up a good agency, I'd probably get a job - which rather defeats the purpose of the exercise. My purpose is to make the boss wince every time there's a contracting rate review. And to rake in more dosh of course.

Bearing in mind my job prospects, I put some feelers out with a couple of the large but mostly dodgy agencies. The sort of agency that will 'smooth out the wrinkles' in your CV before faxing them on to a prospective employer.

Wrinkles like, 'I done DOS once,' and 'I know how to turn my screen on,' become 'Wrote DOS from scratch,' and 'Extensive Hardware Support Background'.

I expect the worst and get it. I meet my placement consultant at a local pub, where he buys me a beer to prove that he's really my friend, and not someone who wants a criminal percentage of my wages.

"So," my personally assigned, widely experienced, computing professional placement consultant says: "You're looking for a position in networking?"

"Yes."

"What sort of experience do you have?"

I run through a quick synopsis of the past 10 years.

"Excellent. Now, have you had much experience of DOS?"

"Why?"

"Well we have an excellent position in DOS consultancy at the moment."

"And you feel that's a networking position?" I ask, already annoyed.

"Well, not exactly. Initially it would be more of a help desk role."

"Not interested. I'm networks, not systems, and definitely not support."

"Ah. Oh well, it was a thought. What about VAX/VMS?"

"DECNet? TCP/IP? Dare I say it, CI?"

"No, more in the lines of Cobol Programming. Great position there. In Milton Ke.."

"No."

"Very good pay..."

"If I'd wanted to do Cobol Programming I would have said so. But I didn't, I said 'networking'."

"Of course, so you did. hardware engineering doesn't interest you?"

"What sort of hardware?"

"Dead terminals mainly. But when they're working they're connected to a terminal server, which is on a network..." he calls out as I leave the pub, drink only half finished.

The boss meanwhile has been playing my game and has faxed out to a couple of contracting agencies himself, obviously in an effort to show me how cheaply he can get a replacement. It's sad how people delude themselves sometimes.

My next few days are punctuated by offers of data entry, fill-in secretarial work, tape monkeying etc. Which I decline. At long last one of the agencies comes through with a price that would bring tears to the boss's eyes. I get the details and am thinking about it when the boss walks in.

"I'll take it," I say, as the boss discreetly tunes into my conversation.

"Take what?" he asks.

"The job I was just offered," I reply, smiling cheesily.

He rallies under the pressure and responds: "And just in time too!"

"For what, Christmas shopping?" I say, applying pressure.

"No. Just in time for us. I've found your replacement!" he gloats, shaking a wad of barely readable faxed paper.

"You're not serious!" I say, pointing at the paper, "you can't even read it!"

"Don't need to," he smirks, "I rang them and verified the details."

"You're not going to trust THAT agency are you?" I cry. "They can't even place an advert properly, let alone a computing professional."

"That's where you're wrong!" the boss snarls. "They HAVE found me someone. Far more experienced than you, and only a fraction more expensive. And he starts this afternoon. SECURITY!"

The moment the boss has been dreaming of for months has arrived.

"Escort this member of the public to the street. Don't let him touch anything, and take his access keys off him at the door. He's to speak to no-one. And have him removed from the contractors' register IMMEDIATELY! Have his personal effects checked for items of the company's, then forward them on to him."

Job done, he swaggers back to his office, the John Wayne of networks and systems.

I am escorted to the street and hand over my access keys. I take a quick survey of the building that was once my workplace, then wander back in to reception.

>Ding!< "Hello," I smile to the receptionist. "I've just been appointed to a position as Network Administrator. Could you ring my supervisor please..."

Can't wait to see John Wayne's face. Or my new pay cheque. Or the memo saying that as a new entry on the contractors' register I am required to attend a paid week's-worth of safety lectures.

---

**A pay rise in his pocket, and an admiring pimply-faced-youth looking on, the BOFH plays safe ...**

Today, to fulfil the terms of my employment as a newly arrived contractor at my old job, I'm attending the site safety course. It's the usual routine of switching equipment off when not in use, and so on - kids' stuff.

"Does anyone know what this is?" our instructor asks, holding up a section of mains flex with exposed wiring.

"An accident waiting to happen," I answer helpfully.

"Excellent. Completely correct," he gushes, pleased with the audience participation so far.

"And what about this?" he asks, holding up a length of data cable in a similar condition.

"An accident waiting to happen," I reply once more.

"Ah well, not exactly," he chuckles.

"It is if you tie it two inches from the ground on the third step from the top of a darkened sixth floor stairwell."

Our instructor's eyes narrow for a moment as he tries to place the face ...

Recognition strikes.

"You've done this course before, haven't you?"

"Well, yes I have, but I didn't get the certificate at the end. No-one did as it turned out; not after you fell down that stairwell, broke your clavicle and lost our evaluation papers. Lost your footing on the third step from the top, didn't you?"

He snarls lightly as it all comes flooding back. The fall, the ambulance ride, the chance statement beforehand that my policy of 'Plug and Pray' was not company policy. His manner warns me that 'forgive and forget' is not company policy either...

Sure enough, slipping back early from morning tea, I notice that my chair isn't where I left it. A quick once-over informs me that it's missing some vital supportive parts. I slip it to the back of the room and select another.

As I'm still alone, I check out the presentation on our instructor's PC and make a few modifications to his slides. As everyone returns, I fall back into my new chair with a comforting 'thump'. I can't help but notice the look of irritation on our tutor's face, an expression which gets progressively worse as we're entertained by his most interesting display of slides. The slide about not picking your nose and eating it in the lift seems to be a real crowd pleaser.

"Well, thanks very much for that," I say at the end of the course. "And rest assured I will pay close attention to that slide on not eating the local beef. Valuable advice - and such a change from the

usual warnings about checking the floors in cable ducts."

The next morning the boss wanders in looking harassed.

"Ah Simon, I have a complaint here about you."

"A complaint! About him! I can't believe it!" the PFY cries, clutching his hand to his brow and, it must be said, overplaying the shocked co-worker just a little.

"Yes, our safety tutor has complained that you tampered with his presentation slides."

"TAMPERED WITH HIS SLIDES!" the PFY continues, silenced with a dry look from the boss.

"Well, I may have made a few grammatical corrections," I admit. "But nothing that didn't improve the document overall. Anyway, if it was that bad he could always recover his old presentation from the back-up system."

"Yes, that was the first option - until we found the missing screen degaussing wand in the tape rack."

The PFY stifles a guilty giggle.

"The off-site back-up tapes?" I suggest helpfully.

"Yes, there seems to be some problem with that," the boss replies suspiciously. "The tape content doesn't match the barcode index."

"Well, the barcode reader on one of the drives has been playing up," I reply. "It's possible his archive was written to a tape with a similar checksum."

"And how many tapes could that be?"

"About 2,000 - they all have the same checksum unfortunately - it's a bug in the software that I noted in a memo to you about, let's see, two months ago?"

"Ah. Well, I don't see why he can't type it in again," the boss says, sweeping the whole thing under the carpet and wandering off.

"Was there really a memo?" the PFY asks.

"Yep. A Buck-Pass memo with lots of buzzwords at the top to scare him off. Now he'll read it and find out the buck stopped with him."

"So what will happen?"

"Oh, the usual cover-up - an apologetic phone call in a couple of minutes followed by the rapid and angry entrance of a safety instructor through that doorway over there..."

Twenty five minutes later my practical demonstration to the PFY about the dangers of tying a piece of data cable an inch from the ground in a darkened doorway is complete. I grab a blank certificate of attendance from the pile left on the floor by the First Aid nurse and get the PFY to fill in the

blanks.

The world of networking is full of accidents waiting to happen.

---

### **The Bastard Operator from Hell suffers from some temporary telephone trouble ...**

"We might have a little problem with the UPS", the PFY calls as he passes, indicating with a sneaky nod the comms room. I grab the laptop with the UPS diagnostics on it and follow him.

Having no real need for the laptop I slip it onto the floor as soon as I'm inside and "stress test" any listening devices that may have been "accidentally" left there by the boss by inserting my pen into the cooling fan at the rear of the UPS

"What's the problem?" I ask, shouting over the noise of a plastic ballpoint being buzzed away by the heftiest cooling fins in the room.

"The boss has found out about the help line" he shouts, looking around warily, expecting capture and torture at any moment.

Oh dear. A great little money spinner that too. A reasonably simple idea in theory - automatically divert every newly disconnected phone in the company to an 0898 number which gives you sound computing advice.

Advice like "Your problem sounds like inadequate air cooling. The only possible solution is to water cool your computer. Go to the water fountain..." etc. Amazing how many calls a person receives once they leave - at 99p a minute - and yet more amazing how many phones don't have forwarding toll-bars.

As quickly as possible I ring the 0898 people and reluctantly shout to them that we wish to discontinue the service, then get the cheque sent on to my accountant under my little-known pseudonym of "Deceased". (no first or middle initials - Great for tax purposes). The figure they mention cheers the PFY and me up though. Obviously more calls than I'd imagined.

"How did they find out?" I ask

"I think I might have keyed in a typo the last disconnect and got a live one instead" the PFY confesses, with a due amount of trepidation.

Forgiveness being the key in times of crisis, I figure we bide our time looking like we're fixing the UPS until the Boss can't take it any more.

Minutes later the boss bursts in full tilt to collect what his listening device can't and collects my laptop with his shoe instead. His tardy reflexes divert his shoe mid-stomp so that he catches the side of it, flipping open its cover and sending him hurtling face first into a comms rack.

Nasty.

"Oooh" the PFY mutters, "I bet that hurt".

The look on the boss's face as he roughly extricates himself from the dangling cables confirms this guess..

"What the hell are you doing in here?" he snarls, dabbing at his grazed facials with his handkerchief

"Just checking out this noisy fan. It looks serious", I say, giving it a hefty jab out of his sight for old times sake.

Did I say old time's sake? I meant last time's sake. The fan, having had enough of the extra load of my pen, stops completely, emitting nothing but a tiny >click< and shuddering to a halt.

"BLOODY HELL!" the boss shouts over the UPS alarm, which is no mean feat considering it's made to be heard through the sound-proofed wall.

"SWITCH IT OVER T...o the other unit" he finishes as I press the Alarm Silence button

"There's not much chance of that", the PFY calls, bringing over the shredded remains of the laptop, the condition of which would seem to have got a lot worse in the last few seconds.

"Sorry about that", he says, "but someone left a cable laying on the ground ..."

We turn to the boss.

"...which I tripped over."

"Well it's too late for that - get another one!" the boss shouts, self-preservation at the management meeting key in his mind.

"We can't", I chip in. "The backup's got a dead hard-drive that you wouldn't let us replace", I add, applying a recent situation to my advantage.

"Whew!" The PFY mutters, "wouldn't want to be in your shoes. It won't look at all good that - your budget being the cause a site outage ..."

"A SITE OUTAGE!?!!" the boss gasps.

"Well, you did say that all faulty UPS units in the comms cupboards should be replaced with a feed from the central UPS to cut costs ...", I add

The boss gets that hunted look.

"All right, what do you want?"

"I think you already know that", I smile, benevolently. Or is that malevolently, I always get those two mixed up.

Ten minutes later I have the printed copies of his telephone enquiry as well as the photocopies he hid in the safe just in case.

I pop back to the UPS as it's nearing its temperature cut-out point and demonstrate how simple it is to manually reset a fan circuit breaker ...

It's funny how things work out for the best, isn't it?

---

### **A heated exchange with the boss over air-conditioning raises temperatures all round ...**

It's a balmy mid-morning when the PFY slips back into the offices with this morning's purchase following my specific instructions.

"One finely crafted plastic electric kettle, with safety cutout to prevent element burnout," I say, smiling at the perfection of my plan.

"But we've got a coffee and tea maker!" he cries.

Filling the jug from the water fountain I shake my head. "What happens every summer?" I ask.

"It gets hot?" he guesses.

"Correct. And our air conditioning system does what?"

"Fails."

"And we have to what?" I ask.

"Sit in the comms room all day."

"Correct. Grab the variable step-down transformer and meet me in the comms room."

He does as I bid and moments later I've set the variac at five volts, plugged the jug into it, and hidden the lot under a sub-floor ventilation grill.

"Your mission, should you choose to accept it - you don't have a choice by the way, it's just an expression - is to keep this jug topped up while increasing the voltage by five volts a day."

I take him over to a wall thermostat and pull the cover off.

"Step 2, turn the set screw on all the thermostats anti-clockwise by five degrees every day, making the air-con think it's getting cooler in here. Now - any questions?"

"Yeah, what happens when the variable transformer gets up to 200 volts?"

"Twenty quid says the jug won't get past 50."

"You're on!" the PFY gasps, seeking easy money.

"And no cheating by not filling the jug!" I add, knowing his nature.

The bet agreed, I busy myself on network load testing for a few days. When I'm sick of networked Doom-II, I ring the boss up and tell him about the air-con problems in the comms room. True to form, he wanders around the comms room tapping the thermostats and sniffing the air for moisture. Exhausting his technical repertoire, he calls in some heating professionals who inform him that our measurements are OK.

"You'll need another unit," the technician tells the boss. "Your current ones look to be overloaded."

"I told the boss last summer that this was going to happen," I add, "but he did nothing about it and now look what's happening."

The slight throwing down of the gauntlet here will set his mood for the entire event. He probably suspects something is up but can't think of what it is and is desperate to thwart me - especially with my recent UPS fan victory.

"Yes, well, we'll have to put another unit in, but where..." he smiles realising the prime location right in front of his eyes. "What about there?" he asks, pointing to the wall between the comms room and the networks room.

"Not a good idea," the heating tech says, "the heat exchanger exhaust would make the room behind there a sweatbox."

"Well it doesn't look like there are any viable alternatives," the boss replies smugly.

"What about over there?" I ask, pointing to a gap between air conditioners in the opposite wall.

"No can do," the boss chimes in "too many units there already which would make the building structurally unsafe."

Something tells me he's done his homework on this one.

"So that wall it is," he smiles, gleefully indicating an area which would be right between my desk and the PFY's.

The PFY's look of horror speaks volumes.

Two weeks later, the control room is getting a tad uncomfortable, especially since someone authorised our windows to be riveted shut.

Visitors are at an all time low, with only the boss stopping behind the double-glazed viewing window to gloat every day or so.

Until D-Day that is.

The PFY and I are in exceptionally early to take my plan through to completion. Completion being removing the air-con from its mounting, turning it, and slipping it back in.

"The boss is bound to notice!" the PFY cries.

"He doesn't come in here any more - no-one does," I reply, soothing his fears.

"But he does go through the back way to the comms room and he'll see the back of the unit."

"Not when you swap the covers he won't."

"That won't fool him!"

"I believe it will - he only found out I swapped the covers of the fax machine and the shredder the other day. Pity the 'shredder' autodialled the newspapers with that expenditure blowout report of the other day. Tabloids can be so irresponsible."

"What did the boss do when he found out?"

"What do you think? Admit he was responsible for making us a laughing stock? Now I've got a quick job for you."

"What is it?"

"Redo your time sheets - they were his last 'fax'."

"You bastard!"

"In the flesh, on the prowl, and waiting for my 20 quid..."

---

### **The BOFH becomes a contract killer as he undoes some damage caused by the boss ...**

I'm not happy. True, that's not such a rare occurrence, but today I'm VERY unhappy.

The boss has just dropped a bombshell in that he has single-handedly negotiated a bulk deal maintenance contract from one of our hardware suppliers entitling us to a 50 per cent discount on the maintenance of a machine.

Now I'm as much in favour of maintenance discounts as the next Systems and Networks Administrator who believes that most maintenance engineers should be struck about the head with a rugby sock full of thin-wire terminators, but this sounds a tad suspicious.

The boss, well known for having problems negotiating hallways, has somehow managed to cheat the highly skilled, money-grabbing, shafting professionals that make up the maintenance sales team at 'Rob-me-blind' Corp.

Uh-huh.

And while he was at it, he found his office without asking for help.

I don't think so.

So all that remains is for me to see what sort of complete pants-downer we've got.

"So what sort of contract is it?" I ask him, once he's back in his office gloating.

"Standard contract as before, only I've got the bastards LOCKED INTO IT for 20 years!" he cries gleefully. "IT'S AIRTIGHT! I had their lawyer squirming!"

"And OUR lawyer?" I ask, expecting the inevitable. "Overrated!" he replies. "Could have done it with my eyes closed"

Looking over the contract, I see he probably did.

"Mmm. One small question," I say, teeing up for a long drive down the fairway of hopelessness.

"Yes?"

"You do realise that WE are also locked into this deal for 20 years?"

"Of course."

"Well, bearing that in mind, could you point me to any - ANY piece of equipment we've had for more than five years, let alone 20?"

A penny starts the long drop.

"Uh...Ummmm...well...nothing?!?" he squeaks as his penny investment policy matures.

"Not quite true," I say. "We do have the large IBM card punching machine in the computer room. And do you know why we have it?"

"To punch cards?"

"Not when we don't have the corresponding reader..."

"Air conditioner ballast!" he blurts, just guessing.

"No. True, switching it off would relieve the necessity for a couple of the larger aircons, but no. The reason we have it is because it was put in when the building was first commissioned. It's not even ours. It's worth about £200 as scrap, only we can't collect BECAUSE IT'S TOO BIG TO GET OUT THE BLOODY DOOR!"

"I don't get the point," the boss confesses.

I check the document to make sure.

"Well, you have signed, a BINDING, AIRTIGHT contract which says that we will pay them £2,000 a month, every month, for the next 20 years, to look after a minicomputer that in about five years' time won't even put up a good show against a pocket calculator. And you didn't ask to see their licence beforehand?!"

"Which licence?"

"THEIR BLOODY LICENCE TO PRINT MONEY! YOU'VE GIVEN THEM EVERYTHING!"

THE ONLY THING YOU MISSED OUT WAS AN ACCIDENT INDEMNITY CLAUSE!" I shout in a frenzy.

An ice cold thought hits me. "You didn't give them complete indemnity against damage, did you?"

"What do you mean?" our skilled arbitration professional asks.

"Complete indemnity against damage. You know, they trip on a floor tile and drop their screwdriver down a ventilation hole and short the power supply to the backplane and blow a machine to bits. Their responsibility ends with 'SORRY'."

"Uhhhhmmmm... No. No, in fact I'm sure I didn't because once an engineer snapped the lead in my propelling pencil and we made him pay!"

"Yes, well at £2,000 a month, I'm sure the cost of a pencil lead will have them insuring themselves to the hilt."

Two weeks later the engineer from Rob-us-Blind-for-20-years arrives.

To make us feel like he's earning his dosh he unscrews the cover, gives the diagnostic lights a look, writes down a couple of numbers, then smiling smugly, puts the cover back on.

In fact he's so smug he doesn't even notice the PFY snaffling one of his screwdrivers and wandering off.

Nor does he notice the floor tile which is sitting a little higher than the others. Until he trips on it, tool-kit bursting on impact (as planned) followed by an extremely loud 'BANG' as our priceless, museum piece, very first company card punch machine explodes with his screwdriver between the power supply and the wiring loom.

Being an old machine it catches fire as well. Or that could be the petrol-soaked rag the PFY and I stuffed it with beforehand.

The boss and one of our lawyers gaze soundlessly from behind the viewing screen, the lawyer contemplating damages, the boss contemplating the humungous favour he'll owe me at contract renegotiation time...

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### **As the BOFH explains, dummies don't grow on trees, it takes years of training ...**

"Hello. Is that Network Support?" the user asks over hands-free.

I remove our topological LAN Viewing equipment (VR Glasses) and disconnect from our powerful network analysis server (VR Tank-Combat Games Machine) and direct my attention to the caller.

Caller-Id indicates a user at beancounter central is on the line.

"Yes, this is network support," I reply.

"Oh. I have a problem with FTP-ing from an Internet ftp server in Brussels. It keeps dropping my connection just after I've downloaded a megabyte."

The PFY looks over to me with a cheesy grin and scribbles out a hasty message: "TODAY'S LIMIT 1024K" and points at his packet filter software.

He's getting good.

"Ah yes," I say, flicking over the page on my excuse calendar, "We're getting a lot of this at the moment. We believe it's due to...Network Destabilisation from Low Voltage Fluorescent Lamp Spikes."

"Come again?"

"Well, when a fluorescent lamp starts, it sends a spike back down the power cable which in turn induces an interference current in network cabling nearby. In low voltage circuits this effect is magnified."

DUMMY MODE ON

[From the bastard Glossary:

*DUMMY MODE*, *n.* The mode in which a user, overcome by technical terms, will believe, and/or do, anything he or she is told.]

"DUH-HUH. So what do I do?"

[Told you so.]

"Well, today nothing, as there's obviously something generating spikes. How big was the file you wanted?"

"About 1.6 Megs"

I scribble: "TOMORROW'S LIMIT 1.59 MEGS" and pass it to the PFY.

"Well," I respond, "are there any low-voltage fluorescent tubes on your floor?"

"I don't know."

"Well, they'll be smallish, bar-like lights - usually inside signs or displays."

"THE FIRE EXIT SIGNS!!" my caller shouts from the end of the garden path he's been led down.

"Of course!" I cry, sharing his enthusiasm. "They're right above doorways, which is where our cable is fed. Well, there's probably nothing you can do about it now, as we can't refeed our network cabling, I'm sorry,"

"What about if we moved the exit signs?"

"Oh, I'm afraid WE couldn't do that, even if we had the time."

"Oh?"

"No, we simply do not have the time to remove the cable duct covers, slide the exit signs along the duct for a couple of yards to get them away from the data cables, then replace the covers in the newly vacated space for every exit sign on your floor."

"Oh" he replies, mind ticking over almost audibly. "Never mind then. I'll just try bringing the file across in pieces then."

I hang up then cross out the 1024K on the PFY's bit of paper and put 50K in its place, nodding to him to action it.

"He won't do it you know..." the PFY says, so little faith in one so young.

"10 Quid?" I ask.

"You're on," he says, thinking naive "easy money" thoughts.

The next morning comes and I stash a crisp new 10 pound note in my wallet with a smug grin. The PFY notes with disgust the repositioning of the Exit signs halfway along the walls, well clear of the "network cabling" in the doorways.

"Never underestimate the desperation of a user," I mention, furthering his education once more.

To take his mind off it, I get him to install the new 'Infra Red Wireless LAN Transceivers' (infra-red cameras), in the floors mentioned and drop some cable boxes around the place so it looks like we're going to do something.

Later that afternoon, Network Control is crammed to capacity with a dozen or so fellow network engineers from other companies.

"You all know the rules" I state, "20 quid a player, except for the PFY and I, who, as host, get first pick of a free player"

Nods all round as the PFY takes the bets and we switch on the gaming screens. Once the choosing of players is complete, we're ready to go.

"Let the game commence!" I shout, flicking the switch to cut the lights to Beancounter central and its stairwells. I then activate the fire alarms.

"The person whose player is the first to the safety of a stairwell, takes the pool!"

Through the infrared monitor we watch the pandemonium break out, as in the darkness, everyone runs for apparent safety.

The toll of the newly shifted exit signs is fairly high and will probably leave an impression on the wall that only a thick coat of plaster will put right.

Next on the obstacle list (for the smarter contestants) are the boxes of cable the PFY left randomly in the cubicle "corridors" earlier on.

"It's like a multi-ball game of pinball down there!" the PFY cries watching in disbelief.

Ten minutes later I'm counting my winnings - of course I did back the mover of the signs in the first place....

And they say there's no money in networking any more.

---

### **The Bastard's writing regresses to childlike scrawls as he attempts some artistic expenses ...**

It's a balmy day at Network Central when I roll along to a meeting with the bean counter types about the expense claims that I've put in over the last two months.

It seems the brand, spanking new, state-of-the-art, bells-and-whistles character recognition software (to recognise expenses claims and whack them straight into a spreadsheet to perform mystical analyses of who's spending all the expenses money) has a slight hiccup when it comes to my claims and receipts. Perhaps, and I'm only guessing here, it's because I don't WANT anyone recognising what the hell my expenses really are.

If I wanted the boss to read 'beer and spirits' on my meal allowance form, I could have printed, in bold capitals, 'BEER AND SPIRITS', and not scrawled 'Breek and Sprorts' in a dyslexic manner.

It's a network contractor's prerogative to fork out their own money for a couple of packets of salt and vinegar crisps, then clock up a humungous bar-tab and get it paid for by the firm! In fact, it's a God-given right!

I mentally prepare for the interview with a couple of glasses of lager and a plate of chips at the local. Ten minutes later I'm in legume-reckoning central, talking to one of its many representatives.

"OK, meal allowances...what on earth does that say?" the beancounter challenges. "Breek and sprorts. What the hell's breek and sprorts?"

"Let me see..." I answer, feigning contemplation. "Oh! That's beef! I must have had the steak!"

"And sprorts?"

"Sprorts. Hmm...brussels sprouts!"

"You ate £150 worth of beef and brussels sprouts??"

"I might have. They were out of season.. Quite yummy if you serve them right. Expensive out of season too. And it was a rather large steak..."

Half an hour of creative food visualisation later...

"What's this one?" asks the accountant. "Breek and escrot?"

"Well, the first one's obviously beef again and the second one...hmmmmm... almost looks like

ESCORT doesn't it?! HA HA HA! Imagine that - work paying for an escort! No, I don't know what it could be - some form of delicacy that they serve at the Amsterdam Convention Centre?

I saw it coming of course. That new handwriting analysis software could have taken my 'breek and sprorts', my 'ligord and ammo' and come up with 'beer and spirits', 'liquor and ammo', spill the beans on where I bought them, how much it was a shot, and what her name was!

I don't think I need to tell you that this is a bad thing.

Luckily I am a firm believer in the ideal that as technology advances, people should regress as a form of self-defence. So I started varying my choice of writing implement and size, filling my forms out half in crayon, half in finger paint (all perfectly acceptable under the current expense claim directives which dictate that claims must be filled out in the claimant's handwriting).

Perhaps it's the writing in letters that varies between 16 point and 1600 point that's throwing the software off...

I'm drawn back to consciousness by the arrival of a new bean counter to replace my one, who by this time has worn out...

"Simon, just a couple more hiccups," my new bean counter starts.

"Mmmm?" I respond, only wanting to help.

"This one. It's a vertical line, in crayon I think?"

"Yes. That would be correct. I believe that was the first line of the V in the word veal."

"Huh?"

"Had a hand cramp, couldn't write any smaller. I could hardly hold the crayon in fact. And I didn't want to forget. Surely I'm not going to be penalised for a personal disability?" The words 'personal disability' have him almost wetting his pants with fear. The new huggy-feely fringe in upper management is so politically sound they echo, and even a sniff of insensitivity would be treated with lightening quick dismissal.

"Ah. OK. But £100 worth of veal?" he asks nervously.

"There was a side-salad too. Had grapes in it."

"I see. And this? It looks like a paint slur?"

"Finger paint." I reply. "Steak Sandwich. Extremely rare. See, you can see where the tail of the Y was."

"It's a smudge!"

"No, it really says that. I had to squish it up to fit it on the form due to the resolution of my finger."

"Why didn't you use a pen?"

"What? And risk RSI?"

Ten minutes later, another broken beancounter can be added to the tally as he gives in completely and adds up the totals.

"Oh!" I say, suddenly remembering "I've got one more."

"What's that?" he asks. "Breek and clops from today?"

"That would be...beef and chops."

"You had two meat dishes."

"Of course, got to keep my protein up!"

It's a dog's life really...

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### **The Bastard puts a price tag on user access after a particularly annoying request ...**

It's training time and today I'm showing the PFY through the computer room when the phone rings. What the hey, no-one's around, so I pick it up.

"Hello."

"Is that the Computer Room?"

"Yes..."

"Is that the Systems Operator?"

I look around quickly - apart from the PFY there's no witnesses.

"..Yes..."

"I think you've got a dead hard disk on the database server."

"Really? What makes you think that?"

"Well, my database updates are very slow."

"What updates?"

"I'm capitalising the middle initial of all staff and contractors since 1991."

"How ... useful. And you expect that to rocket through in a couple of seconds do you?"

"So it's not a disk problem?"

"No, we'd know ahead of time if our disks were faulty - they have predictive failure."

"Really?"

"Yes, and I predict that they will fail in three seconds"

"Why's that?"

"Because I'm going to switch the power off."

I hear a flurry of keystrokes, but it's far too late to have any effect ...

Some wire jiggling and a loud click later and an impromptu transaction rollback is scheduled for disk restart time. The PFY, taking his education seriously, notes everything.

"No witnesses," I mention as we move on to the next piece of kit, just in time to catch sight of the boss bounding past the observation window on his way in. Another >CLICK< and the evidence disappears.

"What happened?" the boss blurts, rushing up.

"When?" I ask, innocent and confused.

"Just then - my database session has hung!"

The PFY and I play dumb while the boss examines the system console screen for signs of bastardisation. None are evident, so after a few seconds he wanders off. When I'm sure he's not coming back I plug the console cable back in and watch the disk repair messages roll by.

The Computer Room phone rings again and the PFY reaches for it. I shake my head, mouthing the word "Set-up". The boss is so predictable he belongs in the drive cabinet. I pick up the phone.

"Help, my spreadsheet's gone funny!" the user cries.

"In what way?" I ask

"Well, the bit where it gets the info from the database has just stopped!"

"Hmm. This sounds like you have an pre-revision embedded SQL statement."

DUMMY MODE ON

"Huh?"

"Okay, go back to your spreadsheet. There's an option in the menu somewhere to Examine Sql."

"Uuuuum... Oh, yes, there it is!"

"Okay, click on it. A window pops up saying something like SELECT something FROM something else WHERE some other stuff."

"Yeah, it does."

"Cut out everything except the stuff between the FROM and the WHERE."

"Okay, it's just HR\_IDX, a comma, HR\_SAL\_SCALE a comma and HR\_NAME."

"Right, those are the erroneous SQLs that you want to get rid of. So before each word type 'DROP', then add a semi-colon instead of the comma. One drop command per line. Then check the 'auto-commit' box. Lastly, use your boss's username and password so that it fixes the bad SQL."

"But I don't know his passw ..."

"Yes, you do. It's his wife's name isn't it?"

"Her middle name. But he said not to use it because it's got rights to ..."

"To repair SQL like you need to..."

"Oh... >clickety-click< ... That's funny. My spreadsheet has gone blank now!"

"That's right, because the repairs are taking place. Now when your boss gets him, tell him about the 'repairs' that you made."

"Okay. Thanks!"

"That's okay. It's my pleasure. Really."

I haven't even lifted my hand from the receiver when it rings again.

"Computer Room ..." I sigh.

"Hi, we're having a problem with the Human Resource Database. It's almost as if half the tables have disappeared!"

"Yes," I mutter, "We've been doing a lot of work on that recently."

"Oh. Well, is it working now?"

"Of course it is. And you'll be able to use it shortly ..."

"Great!"

"... when you get access. And the access charge today is five quid."

"What?!"

"Each!"

"You're joking!"

"Per minute."

"You can't do that!"

"You're right. I can't - it's my lunchtime, perhaps my assistant can help you."

I direct them to the PFY and head up to the staff cafeteria to check out today's contractor perk.

"Ten quid," I hear the PFY chant.

"What"

"Each. Per minute."

Fifteen minutes later he joins me in the cafeteria to outline the band of blood-seeking users lurking outside the computer room in wait for the return of the systems operators.

You can't pay for satisfaction like that. Unless you're a user of course.

---

### **The Bastard Operator From Hell puts in a day on the helpdesk ...**

"Well I feel it would be good for intra-departmental understanding if we were all to work in other positions for a while", the boss says, defending his master plan of having 'job share' once every six months "The CEO was very impressed with my initiative!"

"But surely you must realise that we'll be leaving network operations completely open with no staff?"

"Which is why I've put you in the helpdesk area" the boss replies smugly. "You'll be the first to know of any problems that arise..."

All my arguments are defeated by the boss in double-quick time, which means that a day in the helldesk is inevitable.

The PFY, bless him, smells a rat.

"So what's going on?", he asks suspiciously. "The boss couldn't answer an operational question if he'd been up all night studying, yet today he had solutions for everything! And you didn't even put up a fight. It's almost as if you wanted to work on the helldesk! What's up!?!?"

Sadly it is necessary to let someone else in on my master plan, if only to prove that I am still in possession of a full quota of marbles.

"Cast your eyes around the department", I say. "Look at the equipment therein! Where does the newest of that equipment reside?"

"Well, the helpdesk - they need the latest and best to test out all the caller's software on their own machines. What's your point?"

"How much RAM has your PC got?" I ask

"16 Meg"

"WINDOW DRESSING!", I cry "Why, every single helpdesk machine has at least 32, and a couple have 64!"

"YOU'RE GOING TO STEAL THEIR HARDWARE!", the PFY cries, shocked. "Errrrmmm ... we're going halves in it though, aren't we?"

"Ja, mein Freund!" I cry, stuffing my 'lunchbox' with tools.

The next day I turn up before start time(!) to assume my new post. The phone rings at 5 minutes to opening, and I'm in such a good mood I answer it.

"Hello, is this the helpdesk?" a nervous voice asks.

"It most certainly is", I gush, all enthusiasm.

"I'm running short of space on the display machine and someone said that I should 'compact' all the unused stuff with a compaction program on the system? Which one would that be?"

"You're on a Macintosh, right?" I ask.

"Yes, the department graphics server" he answers.

"Right. Well, you'll want to use the default compactor that's stored on the desktop. 'Trash', I believe it's called".

"Isn't that how you remove files?"

"No, that's what the ERASE key does. And you don't have one on your computer, so you're completely safe. You just drag the file into the Trash 'folder', and then select 'Empty Trash' to invoke the file into the compactor."

"Really?"

"Yes, it's very efficient too, you'd be surprised how much you can fit on your hard disk if you run it through the compactor."

I leave the poor pleb 'compacting' his entire department's work and get back to removing all the coprocessors and extraneous memory from the machines after replacing their ROM diags to report the missing hardware as present. Child's play, really. To delay discovery I switch virtual memory on wherever possible.

The PFY, meantime, is busy erasing our numbers from the helpdesk phonedlists and shorting the batteries to their phone memories, to the inevitable but somehow satisfying detriment of all those saved numbers.

The phone rings and as the PFY's machine still has its internals hanging out, I answer.

"Hello, Helpdesk?" the caller asks.

"Yes, what can we do for you?", I ask, still pleased with the rapidly growing pile of saleable hardware in my 'lunchbox'.

"I upgraded my software and now my CD-ROM won't play music discs any more" the user bleats.

"Well, it's probably just some dust deposited on the CD-ROM lens" I respond, knowing full well that this is a bug documented on the first page of the manual. But who reads manuals?

"So what do I do?"

"Well, have you got a vendor-supplied, drive-specific, CD-ROM cleaning caddy?", I ask.

"Uh ... no", my user replies

DUMMY MODE ON

"OK, not to worry, you can improvise with a lightly abrasive disk."

"Great!" the user gushes "How?"

"Well, pop down to the Buildings Maintenance desk tomorrow and borrow a 80-grit orbital sanding disk from them. Slip it in your drive and let it run"

"How will I know when it's complete?"

"Well, you'll hear it spinning, then gradually slow down until it stops. When it's stopped your drive is done."

"Hey, thanks", my user gushes, then rings off.

...

The PFY and I are almost sad to leave at the end of the day - the helldesk has plenty of potential. I allow a faint smile cross my face while I push a matchstick into the keyway as the helpdesk door locks shut. Late start for them tomorrow, then ...

---

### **The Bastard and his pimply sidekick spread their network of misery across the land ...**

The PFY and I are in celebratory mode. The bosses have finally seen reason and agreed to become a Corporate Internet Service Provider in the cities that we have offices in, as an attempt to defray operating expenses.

A long-term attempt of course. In the short term however, it will mean long hours of overtime in foreign cities for the PFY and I as we struggle to make our systems foolproof.

It was a done deal from the time the CEO saw the interesting video conferencing tools available on the Internet. The bit about recovering our Internet operating expenses passed him by as he finally saw his very own project achieve fruition after its many stops and starts over the past year. His eyes watered as he thought of his image addressing all our offices simultaneously. I didn't think it politically sound to inform him of the MUTE control that accompanied almost every conferencing client ...

Once I had his signature, I set the wheels in motion immediately by cancelling the contract with our current ISP. A company that still didn't know which side of the information superhighway you were supposed to drive on, and thought that World Wide Web had something to do with driftnets and dolphins. Not that it didn't charge completely through the nasal cavity for its knowledge. When we got stung with a consultancy fee for ringing to say its router was down AGAIN, we knew the end was nigh.

The PFY puts a brave face on it as he heads off to one of our Scottish offices for a week, forced to stay in a luxury hotel as the company's courtesy apartment had apparently been leased to a Mr Babbage - the same person who hadn't shown up to the Welsh courtesy apartment last week. I too, was forced to stay at a hotel - not that I had much time to see my room with all the work I had to do. The hours of which incidentally coincided with the hours that the house bar opened.

Pure coincidence, as I explained to the boss, two days later when he queried me about the astronomical bar-tab. In fact, I could quite honestly say that I had ABSOLUTELY no recollection of ever being there.

Anyway, to placate the boss about all the spending that's been going on, I show him the extra-special bonus advantage we obtained when a company across the road (and only a short trip down some municipal piping away) asked to connect to us. We were only too pleased to connect them to our LAN.

The boss notes carefully the heavy three-phase power cable going into their tiny router, and the four thick-wire-like segments and one UTP segment that emerged. Back at our offices he noticed even more carefully the termination of the 'thick-wire' segments on the input of one of our UPS units. Even he can see that three 2.4KW supplies is an investment in the power bill of the future. That the company is also paying us for the service has him almost smiling. A frightening thought.

He is, however, not the only one to notice. "This Internet thing uses a ton of power," our client's network expert ('ex' being a has-been, 'spurt' being a little drip under pressure) complains. "Our comms room power bill has rocketed skywards!"

"Well it would," I reply. "I mean, after all, you have to push that data all around the world, not just to the next office. Just imagine what your power bill would be like if you weren't connected through us!"

"Oh!" he mumbles. "I hadn't thought of it that way."

"No, and consider the traffic speed difference. What speed do you get from home provider?"

"Oh," he mumbles. "14.4 or 28.8. Much slower than work. Although work does pause from time to time."

"Well we could speed you up of course," I say. "But then that would involve another set of cables

and more power consumption. Then if you wanted, we could run a redundant server over in our offices as well, on our UPS, but you'd have to pay for the power bills for that too."

"Well, the bosses do want redundancy once we start putting up our own home pages..."

I hate me, I really do. It's just like shooting a fish in a barrel. With an elephant gun.

To celebrate my recent successes, I ring through to our other Scottish office to sort out my arrangements for next week's installation.

"Hello? I'd like to reserve the courtesy apartment please...Babbage. London Office. I've already booked? Excellent."

That PFY is damn good.

---

### **Trains, planes and the dreaded laptop spotter - the BOFH brings the anoraks back to earth.**

...

It's trade show time again, and this time it's off to the east coast of the US for a week of seeing what's new in the land of wire wiggling. Of course, I read clippings from the computer press from time to time but it's far better to see an ATM switch in the flesh than on the page.

Actually, it's even more essential to see the inside of a posh hotel bar than to see an ATM switch in the flesh; one must get one's priorities right, and hey, if I wanted to look at flashing lights I could do it in my own air-con comms room instead of a sweaty exhibition hall.

Life is sweet as we cruise over the Atlantic. The canapes are splendid, though the smoked salmon has perhaps been a little over-chilled. We're talking first class, naturally - my turn-left-at-economy-and-it's-by-the-bog seat was mysteriously exchanged for that of a Mrs E. Windsor ... well, it's a pretentious name anyway. I think there must be someone important down the back also, as there are lots of men in dark suits arguing with stewardesses over seats and reservations and stuff; I must complain to the airline about the lousy soundproofing on the first class section - it's very noisy.

"Excuse me, what processor does that have?"

My five-star-brandy-induced trance of peaceful smugness is broken.

"I'm sorry?"

"What processor does your laptop run? Mine's a 133 meg Pentium."

Great. Even worse than the nutter on the bus, I get the computer bore on the plane. At least on the number 2 Routemaster you can push them off the open platform on the Edgeware Road.

"It's a 437 meg SPARC Ultra." Only a slight exaggeration - I like to start gently.

"Really? I didn't know Windows ran on a SPARC."

"It doesn't."

"So what are you running?"

"Solaris 2.7."

"Hey, wow! You must be a serious user."

"Yeah. Something like that." Which makes you a serious luser. "You running Windows 95?"

"Yes."

"Hey, wow. You must be a serious sad bastard."

He smiles uncertainly, trying to convince himself that I'm jesting. Time to sort that misapprehension out for him.

"Did you know that you can speed up that model with a simple hardware mod?"

"Hey, no! Really? How do you do it?"

"Well, I shouldn't really say, as there's a slight risk involved - it will invalidate your warranty."

"That's OK, I'm happy to try it as long as it's pretty certain to work. What do you do?"

"Right. Have you got a paper clip? Actually, any smallish bit of metal wire will do."

"Yes, here you are. What do I do with it?"

"You're going to crank up the speed of the SCSI bus by increasing the power a little. Turn the machine round so the back's facing you, and connect that pin there in the SCSI connector to the earphone plug."

He fiddles about, and manages to lodge the paper-clip appropriately. No blue smoke ...yet.

"Okay, now what?"

"Now you have a machine that you can selectively make faster when you need to. You don't want to just crank it up permanently as that'll eat battery life, so it's best to just speed things up when you really need to."

"So how do I speed it up when I need to?"

"Just play a music disc on the CD. That will cause the voltage in the earphone socket to go up, and so the bus will be energised. Don't play it too loud, though, or you could damage something; something like Dark Side of the Moon should be OK, but watch out for the alarm clocks."

"Hmmm...I don't have any audio CDs here. Can I use the microphone instead?"

"Sure - just set it to 'play through' mode and shout in the mike when you need the speed. Careful not to shout too loud, though."

Fifteen minutes goes by, and I'm beginning to regret what I've done. My friend has discovered that whistling into the mike is the easiest way to make a loudish noise, and it would seem that his particular make of laptop is far more resilient than those I've come across before. Fortunately, help is at hand in the shape of a flustered gentleman who advances rather angrily.

"WILL YOU PACK THAT BLOODY WHISTLING IN!" he screams. At that moment the paper clip does its worst.

Interestingly, Boeing's air conditioning is particularly well-attuned to the smell of smoke - a fire alarm goes off in the distance.

"I think that's a £1,000 fine," I smile sweetly as the stewardesses move to break up the fight breaking out between my geeky companion and the flustered gentleman. Soon, the parties involved are rapidly strapped to their seats with a burly looking steward in attendance. Once again all is calm.

"Sorry for the disturbance, sir. Can I get you another brandy?"

---

## **Fear of a compulsory team-building weekend spurs the BOFH into his own style of teamwork**

...

I'm experimenting with some infra-red remote reboot hardware when the pimply-faced-youth wanders in.

"Who's that?" he asks, pointing at some besuited individual in the next office.

The face seems vaguely familiar, then the ball drops ...

"Something to do with personnel," I reply. "One of those huggy-feely types into team-building and customer expectation, if I remember rightly."

"Our customers already know what to expect!"

"Yes. That could be the problem ..."

"The boss is being a bit brown-nosey," the PFY observes, as the boss welcomes Mr Huggy.

"Yes, and judging by the crawl-factor, I'd say he's been got at from above ..."

Two hours later the PFY sprints in.

"There's something you should know," he says.

"What? You've not been eavesdropping on the boss have you?"

"No, just checking the connectivity of his spare UTP lines. True, the test device has good aural response."

"Almost microphone-like?"

"Ummm ..."

"All right, what is it?" I interrupt.

"They're setting up a divisional retreat!" he blurts.

"A Bloody what!?" I shout, losing composure for a second.

"A divisional retreat. It's not that bad really, is it?" he asks.

"You're joking aren't you? A weekend locked away in team-building hell with people who think that a benchmark comes from not using a doily under your coffee mug?"

"Uuuuhh ..."

"They have client representatives there to annoy you night and day with lame questions like, 'How do you justify your fault resolution policy?'"

"How do we justify it?"

"We don't. Accidental equipment combustion is a proven and documented phenomenon."

"So what are we going to do?"

"Not go. Unless, of course, you look forward to 'Trust' exercises, where you fall backwards into the arms of a group of people who have trouble catching a cold without written instructions."

"Apparently, it's compulsory - or at least the contracting bonus is dependent on attendance."

"The sneaky bastards!"

"So what do we do?" the PFY asks.

"First things first - when is it?"

"Three weeks from Saturday."

We put our heads together and formulate a battle plan so sneaky it would make Rommel weep. The next day we're the first to inform the boss that we'd be delighted to attend. He breaks open a new roll of antacid tablets.

The PFY handles the fax-interception, reducing the 45 single-room accommodation bookings to 10, changes the food budget to alcohol and swaps the light jazz-band evening entertainment to a popular Soho Cabaret act ...

I borrow Mr Huggy's credit card - carelessly locked in the visiting staff office - rewrite the personal

info track with "Stolen card - Detain", then crank the rumour mill into action by leaving empty, alcohol-based cough syrup bottles in his rubbish bin at night. I then swap his laptop power adaptor for a dud.

The next day, the offensive begins ...

"There seems to be something wrong with my adaptor," Mr Huggy says in a surly manner. Apparently, being detained at a garage for an hour by a burly mechanic until his credit card could be verified didn't improve his sense of humour.

The PFY gets him a heavier duty replacement and a loud >CRACK!< later, Mr Huggy walks back in, smelling of smoke.

"Oh dear!" I cry. "The PFY didn't give you a step-UP transformer by accident, did he? I'll tell you what, we'll sort you out with the emergency 386 until your machine is repaired. Four meg should be OK for Windows 95, shouldn't it?"

"Oh, the one with the new infra-red mouse you mean?" the PFY asks.

The next day, the boss gets involved after he receives the query from the bean counters about Mr Huggy's proposed alcohol bill. The rubbish rumours have filtered through by this stage and once he finds out about the cabaret team, the boss calls the PFY and me into his office.

"Have you had anything to do with this?" he asks.

The PFY and I shake our heads.

"Personally," I add, "I've heard the rumours and I think perhaps he's a little too unstable to be doing team management activities."

The seeds of doubt planted, I wait for the PFY to do a bit of fertilisation and watering ...

"Is it just me, or is it hot in the office?" the PFY asks, right on cue.

"Yes, I'm a little hot myself," I reply.

The boss leaps to his latest favourite toy, the air conditioning remote, and adjusts the temperature for us, thus rebooting Mr Huggy's machine for about the third time this morning. We all watch in silence as Mr Huggy pushes his replacement machine off the desk in a fit of madness, then starts taking his office apart.

Ten minutes later, security has carted him away and retreat plans are in the bin where they belong.

And they say that life isn't fair.

---

**Point scoring over network equipment blunders sees the PFY battling it out with the BOFH ...**

"I believe that's another £500 down the toilet and another two points for me," the pimply-faced-youth gloats, adding another tick to the lengthening line in his favour.

True, a competition to see who can destroy the most equipment in a week was a little childish, but it's been slow recently and experimentation is good on-the-job training. We play for the usual stakes, a pint at the pub across town.

"What was it?" I asked, effecting a slight interest.

"I told a user that his problem was power leakage in getting electricity to the sixth floor. The excuse calendar gave me the idea and I worked back from there. Told him the voltage was much lower when it got to his room, so he should ..."

"Switch his PC to 115 Volts," I finish tiredly.

"Was there something wrong with that?" he asks.

"Not per se. But remember our job isn't really to destroy equipment or frighten the daylights out of our users. That's an added bonus in our selflessly devoted lives as technical support persons. Our job is to ensure the smooth running of our networking subsystem."

"By eliminating users on it."

"Show me an Ethernet collision and I'll show you a network that could do with one user fewer," I reply.

"But you're always going to have collisions!"

"And I'm always going to be devoted to network performance enhancement."

"Whilst making a truckload of dosh on the side," the PFY chips in.

"Not necessarily. The truckload of dosh is also an incidental bonus. I encourage 'daily bonuses' because a happy worker is a safe worker, and a safe worker is a good worker."

"For instance, last week when I mailed the video tape of what occurred in the lift at 11.17pm the previous Friday to one of the parties concerned. Upon receipt of a large envelope of unmarked bills from that person, I, as a happy worker, then configured a router in record time. If I'd had things on my mind that displeased me, I may not have completed the job quite so well ..."

"So why did you play the tape on the lunch room share price monitor the next day?"

"Strictly for the good of the company. You saw how much people enjoyed it. They were cheerful and happy, and therefore more productive later that day."

"And the three people concerned?"

"They, being not so cheery, resigned shortly thereafter, proving once again that this is a workplace for happy and productive persons."

"Well, you're still miles behind," he gloats again, flashing the score sheet.

"So what's the score then?"

He counts feverishly and comes back with "40 to nine - to me".

"So, I'm chasing a 26 point lead."

"No, 31!" he corrects.

"Ah, no, 26," I repeat, pushing the boss's laptop off the desk onto the floor and jumping on it.

"That's hardly fair!" he cries.

"Life's not fair," I reply. "But the root password helps."

All this does not disguise the fact that I'm way behind, which concerns me. In fact, there's only 32 minutes between me and having to say the words "Lager shandy", which the PFY doesn't normally drink, but would, just this once, to make me look bad in front of the bar staff and regulars.

With all this at stake, I crash a router and answer the next call.

"Hello?" the voice on the phone asks nervously.

"What seems to be the problem?" I ask.

"It's our machines, they've all hung."

"Yes, it'll be Power Leakage from Heat Displaced Breaker Elements."

DUMMY MODE ON

"Ah-huh ... What do I do?"

"Well, you'll have to call the service electrician to replace the service circuit breaker for the power points along your side of the office."

"But we've got urgent work on!"

"Well, I shouldn't really tell you this ..." I whisper.

"What?" the user asks, hooked.

"Well, you can manually reset the displaced elements."

"How?" he gushes, envisaging fame, fortune and promotion opportunities.

"Just go to the powerbox by the stairwell and flick the switch with the same number as your floor box on and off about 20 times, as quick as you can."

The PFY looks on loathingly. Sure enough, 10 minutes later the full ramifications of my advice have been revealed; I'm only 2 points behind ... which is where I remain until 5pm when the PFY accompanies me to the tube station.

"Some people just haven't got it," he chirps smugly.

His good humour is unbearable, but luckily only lasts until our tube train whistles in and I nudge his laptop bag onto the rails.

"Woopsy!", I say, as I reveal the real time and my part in the clock tampering: "One minute too ... I guess that's a beer you owe me ..."

"You BASTARD!" he says, as the sweet smell of victory fades.

"Chalk it up to the cost of education," I say. "And I hope you'll enjoy that lager shandy ..."

---

### **Battle vibes pulsate as beancounter central takes vehement action against the network lads ...**

I am shocked. Mortified ... In an out-of-the-blue attack from beancounter central - a veritable leguminous dawn-raid - our espresso machine was written off and disposed of overnight.

"I ... I ..." the PFY mutters in disorientation.

Having worked in computing for some time now, I know the importance of back-ups, and bring out my emergency plunger and freeze-dried grounds.

"THAT'S below the belt," the pimply-faced-youth sniffs, as life returns to normal. "I just can't believe they'd do it!"

"Why not?" I reply. "After all, we've been pretty much engaged in an inter-departmental war here, despite what the boss says about us all working towards a common good."

"But the espresso machine!" he cries. "That really hurts. What're we going to do? We have to do something!! Nicad 'RAM' upgrades all round? Another game of blackout fire alarm beancounter pinball?"

I shake my head.

"No, that's just what they'll be expecting. And no dropping out network connections either - they'll be logging it all as an excuse for external service contracts."

"Well, what are we going to do?"

"For now, nothing."

"But ..."

"... but at a later date, we hit them where it really hurts."

Two weeks later the machine is still gone and the PFY is manifesting symptoms of plunger RSI. It's time for action.

"Right. The accounts database!" I cry.

"We can't. I tried yesterday and they've changed the password!" The PFY replies.

Mentally assessing the originality of our beancounters, I try a series of possibilities, hitting paydirt at 'PROFIT'. The database reveals a pristine payments system so well designed that a child could understand it. Which means it's aimed at its correct target audience.

I make a few minor retroactive changes and disconnect. The PFY kills time by leaving an anonymous tip with the company auditors.

The next day dawns and the PFY and I are in bright and early to witness a couple of stony-faced business professionals riding the escalators.

A double click of the escalator PLU control window later, and the escalator performs an impromptu emergency stop, scattering auditors and paraphernalia in all directions. The bleeding nose is sure to add to the impartiality of the impending investigation. Yet another double-click three-seconds later ensures this as recent events are replayed.

Fearing another bank of escalators, the auditors make their second mistake of the day and head for the lifts. Sadly for them, my new lift-control joystick is up and running and they're taken on a G-force adventure, of the sort normally associated with a roller coaster.

The remains of a hearty breakfast down the front of one of the auditor's jackets leaves absolutely no doubt as to the effectiveness of my latest gaming addition. Their mood appears to the casual CCTV viewer as 'aggressive'.

An hour later, the PFY and I wander up to beancounter central to 'fix some networking problems'.

"That's the bastard!" a beancounter shouts, pointing me out to the auditors.

"I'm sorry?" I ask, innocently and humbly.

"Who tampered with the lifts and escalators!"

"I'm sorry?! No-one has touched the lifts or escalators since this department froze the buildings maintenance budget six months ago!"

"We most certainly did not!" the head beancounter cries, emerging from the relative safety of his office.

"Ahhh ... someone did," Auditor one mentions, looking up from the payments database. "The money is now being paid to a ... Clinton Ash."

"C. ASH," I mutter quietly. "Hmmm. Oh, that Panamanian Company! You were just over in Panama six weeks ago weren't you?" I ask the head beancounter.

"Did you post the cheque or deliver it personally?"

Head beancounter is not stupid (surprisingly) and recognises an extremely dodgy situation when he's in it. He dares not discover what else I have up my voluminous electronic sleeves ...

"Ah, Ash and Associates," he ad-libs hurriedly. "Service and Maintenance Contractors."

"Of course!" I gush. "And fitters of espresso machines too, aren't they?"

"...Yes," head beancounter agrees, realising the direction this dialogue is heading.

"Isn't one of their subsidiary companies due to do an installation in our Lunch Room today sometime?"

"...Yyyeess, I'd forgotten about that. I'll check on it this afternoon."

"Why wait?" I ask, passing my cellphone over. "Call now. Hell, they might have even forgotten about the whole thing."

That afternoon the PFY and I are relaxing over a strong brew, contemplating the turn of good fortune that upgraded our old single head espresso machine to the new triple head, auto-grind model.

"I still have a lot to learn," the PFY admits thoughtfully.

"Try to think of it not as learning," I say, "but just as doing your job to the best of your ability..."

---

### **As the boss gets in a twist about Cat 5 cables, the BOFH bides his time to unravel the mess ...**

I'm trying to make a deal with Raoul, a local cabling contractor, about supplying us with some Cat 5 cable, only he's playing hard to get because he knows he's the only one who has any in stock ... which is all according to plan, as I've mentioned the secret code, 'the boss wants', which instantly means I'll go halves in any excess profit.

The boss has suspected something like this for some time but has never had hard proof, despite his request that all telephone transactions be done on 'Hands Free' so he can listen in. Deciding to plan the cabling of a set of refurbished offices single handedly was his second foolish move.

"Well, it's a bit of a tricky one," says my supplier down the phone.

"You see, I have the cable you want - in fact, I have about twice what you'll need - but it's already been purchased and is going to be delivered today. Have you tried another supplier?"

Smooth as greased silk ...

"Yeah, but unfortunately they're all out of Cat 5 too," I reply.

"You're joking!" he gasps, convincingly.

"Yep, it's as if someone has ordered up the entire cable market in one gulp - everyone's sold out for the next couple of days. Are you sure there's nothing you can do?"

"No, not really - about all I've got left is a stack of that untested stuff that we got dirt cheap. It looks like Cat 5, but it's got some foreign military spec on it which doesn't equate to any known rating."

"We'll take it! Get it here by lunchtime!" the boss shouts.

"Hang on a minute there," I say, sneakily flipping on the voice recorder. "Wouldn't it be better to find out what the spec is - it could be field-phone cable for all we know."

"We haven't got time, I've committed to having the new offices up and running in three days!" the boss cries, then dashes off to confirm the attendance of our cabling contractors.

I switch the voice recorder off.

"So, what are we getting?" I ask.

"Not really sure. It was salvaged from a sunken Romanian container - I only bought it for the copper value."

"And will it carry signal?"

"Oh yes"

"Really?"

"Well, maybe - unshielded, untwisted - I'd think twice about using it for Christmas tree lights myself, but there you go."

"So why did you say it looked like Cat 5?" I ask.

"Well, the sheathing is similar, and it comes on a drum," he replies.

"And all ours comes on easy-flow cartons?"

"I didn't say it looked exactly like Cat 5!"

"Excellent!" I chuckle. "Talk to you later."

Later that afternoon, I'm interrupted by the boss in an agitated mood.

"That bloody cable is crap!" he cries.

"Well, I did warn you not to purchase it," I mention, indicating the voice-recording lamp on my phone. "Which reminds me, I must get that bulb fixed."

The boss is now trapped; he has no cable, a deadline, and four or five cabling contractors kicking around in the lobby at a reasonably hefty hourly rate. And he's just paid good money for crap cable.

Being a benevolent sort, I decide to help the boss out. I call Raoul.

"Raoul, what would we be paying for some Cat 5 cable?" I ask.

"I've already told you that we don't have any c..."

"Sorry, let me re-phrase that, what would we be paying for someone else's Cat 5 cable?"

The boss's eyes light up as a solution presents itself. Raoul mentions some disgusting figure which the boss nods at rapidly.

"But our delivery van has been stolen," Raoul adds, according to plan. "You could pick it up from here though."

"No can do," I reply, "my car's a two seater."

"TAKE MINE!" the boss cries, mental clock ticking.

Half an hour later, the pimply-faced-youth and I are loading cartons of cable into the back of the boss's palace on wheels. I decide to drive back now that the PFY has admitted he's actually only had two driving lessons.

Still, I'm sure all the dents (except for the ones left by the three parking meters) will hammer out eventually.

I bid Raoul goodbye and ask him to cancel the mass of Cat 5 orders I placed that caused the artificial shortage of the last two days.

Back at the office, the boss is so pleased he doesn't even mention the remains of his radiator left by the PFY's parking meter interlude. He sends the cabling contractors over.

"Right ...," I say, "... your cable's on the drum over there."

"That stuff?" one of them asks. "Isn't that Romanian writing?"

Ten minutes later Raoul is making me an offer on some excess Cat 5 that I just cannot refuse...

---

### **Rule one of setting up a network: don't let the boss use his 'initiative' and set one up himself**

...

Things aren't well in boss-land. Sadly, the managers have found out about his poorly planned foray into network design and installation. They are NOT pleased. How they got wind of it is anybody's guess, but I did notice that the pimply-faced-youth has completely finished the 'to do' list I left him last night. His attention to detail is commendable.

Fitting substandard cable wouldn't have gone so badly for the boss but for his choice of installation technique. Although it may have been adversely affected by a friendly discussion with the PFY and myself over a couple of lagers.

Boss: "So I'm looking at multi-pair plug looms running along the bottom of raised floor offices, and terminated at the three outlet points I've allocated per room ..."

Me: "Plug looms? Not like the ones we used in the offices downstairs a couple of years ago? One nudge and the connectors went open circuit."

Boss: "But then I thought that single runs of Cat 5 direct from the comms cupboard would be a better option."

PFY: "Along the floor? So when someone spills their coffee it'll trickle through onto the cable, shorting out th..."

Boss (quickly): "Did I say along the floor? I meant inside the wall cavities ..."

Me: "Where it will sag onto the electrical cabling causing major interference."

Boss: "Not when it's cable tied at six inch intervals."

I'm sure you can imagine the rest - like shooting a fish in a barrel.

Still, the three useless wall outlets make interesting conversation pieces. But I could even have forgiven the boss for that, had he not tried for a save by installing some expensive wireless LAN equipment in the outer offices, in the mistaken belief that infra-red was some form of short distance radio transmission medium. (I have absolutely no idea where he got that idea from, although the PFY's nose does look a little longer in recent days). From this, the boss has discovered the negative career potential of installing networking that only works when your office door is open ...

"We've really got a problem here," he chirps in a hunted manner as he paces my office.

"What's that?" I ask helpfully.

"The bloody network, it's a shambles!"

"Well I don't mean to rub salt into your wounds, but you probably should've let us do the planning. After all, that's what we're paid for."

"And what would you have done that was so different?" he demands offensively.

"Hmm..." the PFY cuts in, "I would have run some multi-pair plug looms of real Cat 5 (and not some cheap imitation) under the raised floors, and terminated them at the three outlet points that I'd have allocated per room."

"But that's what I proposed!" he blurts, realisation hitting him.

"Well actions do speak louder than words," I sigh. "Speaking of which, I believe there's a legal one heading your way real soon."

"What am I going to do," he wails in a voice very reminiscent of a user at disk defragmentation time.

"Well you could have the cabling replaced," I reply.

"Yes, you're right, I'll do that."

"Only its cable-tied every six inches inside a wall, and that means they'll have to partially demolish it to ..."

"That's no good!"

"Well then there's only plan B left."

"What is it?"

"You pay a one-time subscription to 'Bastard-Net Inc' and agree to large overtime bills. The problem will be gone by tomorrow and just a memory by next Wednesday."

"What's the subscription and where do I pay?" he blurts.

"Two hundred quid; the PFY and me."

Seeing the rock and hard place at close proximity once more, the boss reaches for his wallet.

The next day, security are combing the building for the eight office doors mysteriously stolen during the night. Strangely, the CCTV noted nothing but a rerun of The Beverly Hillbillies.

Network stability in the new offices is at an all-time high, except for when the head of PR (a heavily built gentleman who looks like he was poured into his clothes and forgot to say when) passes by. His popularity around those offices appears to be waning fast.

One week later, the sub-floor recable is completed and the PFY and I present our overtime sheets for approval.

"Hang on," the boss shouts. "168 hours? That's 24 hours a day for seven days!"

"We did work extremely hard," the PFY chips in.

"You can't seriously expect me to sign this," the boss says, ever so slightly annoyed.

"Of course not," I reply. "We'll just put the network back the way it was then. Oh, and I wonder ..."

"Wonder what?!" the boss snarls.

"Whose fingerprints were on that pile of stolen doors that security found ..."

"When?!"

"Tomorrow morning ..."

One autograph later, the PFY and I take the rest of the day off to recuperate from our stressful overtime.

---

## **Infiltration of the e-mail system provokes the BOFH to adulterate the Yellow Pages ...**

I'm fine tuning the satellite WAN antenna and encryption system when my e-mail client signals a message. I turn from the calibration screen (and US Military movie channel that it has unfortunately become irrevocably locked on to), and check the message.

To receive a message is strange as my normal e-mail address simply discards messages once it's forwarded the sender's e-mail address on to several bulk e-mail marketing lists.

Examining the message, I find it appears to have come from inside the company. Strange, as my e-mail address is known to no-one but the pimply-faced-youth. I know it's not from the PFY as he's organising the distribution of the recently delivered phone directories.

Curiouser and curiouser ...

Further examination reveals that the e-mail has in fact come from the new helpdesk (alias helldesk) software which has trolled the password file of the mail server to build its recipient list. The message itself is anathema to me - a helldesk request.

I hate helldesk software, always have. The thought of some piece of software not accepting the resolution date of 'When I get around to it, if I get around to it' annoys me intensely. Intensely.

So intensely, I log in to the helldesk server.

Twenty minutes later, one of its users calls me.

"Hi, it's the helpdesk here. We were wondering if you knew what's up with our server?"

"No idea," I reply. "Why?"

"Well it's got very slow on updating entries."

"Really? Perhaps it's just poorly designed software with limited scalability," I reply, whipping a couple of convenient buzzwords out of the bag.

"Check to see if it changes over time - it could just be running some internal journalling procedure."

"Oh, of course! Okay, thanks."

She rings off and I crank up the disk-exerciser software from 80 per cent activity to 95 per cent and wind the seek distance from 'Minimal' to 'Potentially Destructive'.

Luckily, I have a patched version of the exerciser which doesn't enforce the standard 15-minute time limit on destructive testing. Well - lucky for some, in any case.

"Five quid says it won't last the night," I call to the PFY.

"No deal," the PFY replies, after checking out my 'testing' parameters, remembering all too well the extremely high failure rate of the disks we 'tested' for the beancounters prior to installation. Eighty-seven per cent within the first month if I remember correctly. And the real tragedy was that they installed an incompatible version of their desktop back-up software too.

Still, a lot of them probably needed the late night typing practice.

Sure enough, the next day there's a very unfortunate head crash on the helldesk server, and everything grinds to a halt. The boss takes a personal interest in the events, but can find no evidence of foul play. I notice that he is personally looking after the helldesk software tape and not trusting the tape library. Hmmm.

I give the PFY the boss's new Yellow Pages to deliver. We share a knowing glance ...

The helldesk server is reinstalled and configured and its entries are re-keyed. A repeat of yesterday's e-mail message arrives in my e-mail queue, just as I notice one of my cron jobs on the server getting stuck in an infinite loop and setting the clock back by five minutes. Every five minutes. But I'm sure the helldesk resolution alarms won't be affected ...

Dedicated to the cause, I call in on the boss.

"I thought I'd just take the helpdesk software tape to the tape library," I offer helpfully.

He hands it over and I accidentally drop it on the floor. In my enthusiasm to pick it up it gets crushed by a chair leg. Four times.

I look up to see the boss's smiling visage. In his hand is a tape indelibly marked 'Helpdesk Software Backup'.

"Wasn't born yesterday," he smirks, placing the tape down on the only cleanish area of his desk - on top of a recently delivered Yellow Pages.

A brief 'hmm' later, I exit the office.

Getting back to my office, I refire up the disk exerciser at 97 per cent and 'Definitely Destructive'.

The next day, horror of horrors, the helldesk server encounters another head crash. I go straight to the boss's office.

"I just thought I'd take the helpdesk software tape to the technicians so that they can reinstall it," I say.

The boss smiles and shakes his head sadly.

"Oh," I respond. "Well, in that case, I'll just get back to work. You haven't seen the portable bulk eraser have you? I'm concerned because it's really sensitive to shocks and things. That's why I made it a protective case out of one of our left over Yellow Pages ..."

The boss's face takes on a slightly pasty look as he glances at the phone book on his desk.

"Ah ... that must be it," I say, and wander out of his office, having found my missing hardware.

Play with fire, get burnt ...

---

**Money is exchanged as the Bastard engages in some very underhand practices ...**

It's a calm afternoon in the office when my personal phone rings. I answer it, listen, then hang up.

"Stress Relief Session," I tell the PFY and we break to the local pub.

I notice that my caller's in place, so I have the PFY get the drinks in.

"Afternoon George," I open, as the PFY and I join him.

"Afternoon," George replies, with a distinctly furtive look.

"You haven't met my assistant have you?" I continue. "PFY, George; George, PFY."

The PFY is giving me a reassuring look that's usually reserved for the mentally unstable (which he'll pay for later if the slamming of his top drawer has anything to do with it).

"George is one of our janitors," I mention, waiting for the gears to turn in the PFY's head.

As his expression remains unchanged I realise I am going to have to remove the spanner from his mental works and kick-start his thought processes.

"George empties the bins of the rich and powerful..." I hint.

The flame of enlightenment splutters in the PFY's eyes as he realises an excellent source of potentially damaging information.

"Hello," he says, holding out his hand.

George doesn't move. I sigh.

"That's not the way you greet George," I explain. "THIS is the way you greet George."

We shake hands and George slips a crisp new 20 quid note into his pocket.

"The videoconferencing project is back," George mentions quietly.

"EXCELLENT!" I cry. "Should be good for a lot of new equipment."

"Not if the carbon of a certain hand-typed order is to be believed..." George mumbles.

"HANDSHAKING PRACTICE!" I say to the PFY.

He ferrets around in his pockets then shakes George's hand. Another 20 quid note disappears and a piece of litter flutters to the floor. Being a tidy type of person, I pocket the litter to dispose of later.

"Well, can't hang round all day I suppose," I quip. "Work to do, etc."

Scant minutes later the PFY and I are poring over an invoice carbon with a lot of zeros in the bottom right hand corner. A lot. An invoice that would've rung a lot of bells on the 'network

monitor' had it been processed in an orthodox manner.

"Smell that?" I ask the PFY.

"What?"

"A rat." I reply. "A big rat, with a flat tail from being stomped on in the recent past."

The PFY looks out to the Boss's doorway.

"A rat with a penchant for mismatched clothing?" he surmises.

"Bingo!"

Further examination of the form identifies the kit being ordered as the latest version of the kit destroyed some months back in an incident which cost my boss's predecessor his job, sadly.

His successor obviously believes (correctly, as it happens) that the person who installs this equipment will have a life-long pal in the CEO.

Losing no time, I phone the supplier in a boss-like voice and ask to change the delivery address. As I ring off, I recall that the words 'as discussed' were on the top of the order.

I dive to the telephone exchange console and swap the boss's line with mine. And not a moment too soon. The supplier's voice again assails my ears.

"YES!" I growl, boss-mode on.

"Hello, I was just ringing to verify a change of delivery address..."

"WHAT?! I JUST BLOODY RANG YOU!!!"

"Yes, but you expressly said..."

"Yes, yes, you're right," I admit. "I'm just anxious to get this kit up and running."

"Well how about we send you our demo model, for a couple of days' head start," he offers graciously.

A day later the PFY and I take delivery of some state-of-the-art videoconferencing equipment then cruise the Internet to find the software we require. While we're at it, we download some useful images.

A day after that we observe the boss via the CCTV as he sneaks his 'newly delivered' equipment to an office near the CEO's.

Within a week the CEO performs his first live company-wide broadcast, timed to reach all our overseas offices at once.

The PFY and I discuss it afterwards.

"I feel that the impact of the address was perhaps heightened by the transposing of the CEO's head onto that naked, gyrating, female body," the PFY offers.

"True," I agree modestly. "However, your morphing of the CEO's head into that of a large pork-producing animal was truly a work of art."

The boss will not be drawn into conversation. Probably because he's so busy packing his desk before security can arrive to 'assist' him down the stairwell.

If I've said it once, I've said it a thousand times - it's a funny old game.

---

### **Ever tempted to play computer games at work? The BOFH sets out to spoil all the fun ...**

"Hello. Have I got through to the network guys?" the user simpers.

"You sure have. How can I help?" I gush, doing my best for PR.

"All the files on my network disk are gone!"

"Gone?"

"Yes. Gone. I had some back-ups of some work stuff on the network disk."

"What was your user name?" I ask.

He tells me, pointlessly, because our caller-id now lists name, room, user name and position in the organisational hierarchy.

In this case: name: Ronald Williams; room: 2.23; user name: prsrw; and position: 'cannon-fodder'.

"Oh yes," I reply, "and your work revolves around executing the various versions of Leisure Suit Larry, Doom, and miscellaneous other games then, does it?"

There's a quick gasp of horror down the line as he realises his fatal mistake of being caught.

"They were there as an evaluation of ..."

"Don't," I sigh. "It's unlikely you could come up with even a mildly convincing excuse that would prevent you being prosecuted for software piracy."

"Prosecuted?"

"Unless, of course, you have the original disks, which would seem unlikely as the files were multi-part archive ..."

"Hang on, how do you know? They were encrypted!"

"With your initials as the key. Honestly, if you're not even going to try ..."

"I can't believe you'd do ..."

"Did it. Done it before. And will do it again. Bye now," I sigh, easing the receiver back down onto the cradle.

The PFY looks confused.

"It's not like you to give a toss about piracy," he says.

"I don't. I just want some space to upload my games on to, and I can't be bothered cheating the boss out of another disk."

The phone rings. I gaze over at the caller ID. It's 'cannon-fodder' again.

The PFY answers it.

"All the files on my hard disk have also gone!" he bleats excitedly.

"Just being thorough," I whisper, leaving the PFY to adlib.

"Yes, that's right," the PFY replies. "That'll be the ..."

>flip< >flip< He takes a quick look for the Excuse Of The Day.

"... Dynamic Transient Magnetic Re-allocation Policy of your hard disk. You should back up your hard disk regularly."

"But I do!" the caller blurts. "It's all backed up, even my files on the server! Can you restore them for me please?"

"Hang on," the PFY replies. "I'll just put you through to Systems Operations to sort the problem out. Extension 8002, in case you get cut off."

He diverts him and hangs up.

"Two minutes, two calls," the PFY says, placing a five-quid note on the table.

"Six minutes, 10 calls," I counter, placing my five quid on top of the PFY's.

We watch cannon-fodder's extension from the Exchange Console and, after five minutes, see him hang up after not getting an answer from Systems Operations, which isn't surprising considering the phone he's connecting to is locked behind a panel in the basement. Seven retries later I pocket 10 quid.

The PFY isn't pleased, expecting more intelligence from the user. His naivety is a constant source of surprise (and income) for me.

We watch on as he calls the real Systems Operations' number.

"Well, there goes your disk space," the PFY says.

"Ten quid it doesn't," I offer.

"You're on," the PFY replies, hoping for the double or nothing approach.

I grab the scummiest tape cartridge from the floor at my feet and we wander into the computer room and wait for one of the systems people. Sure enough, one arrives shortly thereafter with some back-up tapes. Upon seeing me, he clutches the tapes to himself more carefully for some reason ...

"Don't mind me," I say, holding up my tape cartridge, which obliges my true purpose by dropping a bit of its case.

"You read that cartridge on our drive?" the systems guy asks.

"Of course I did!" I reply. "And it worked fine - only a couple of read errors; not bad for a tape this old."

The systems guy rolls his eyes in despair and grabs the cleaning tape from the top of the tape unit. The PFY looks on confused, not knowing what's going on.

His confusion disappears immediately after the cleaning tape is inserted.

"Ah ..." he says, listening carefully to the noise it makes. "Sandpaper .... and ... is it grinding paste?"

He is good.

"Okay - and - for the 10 quid you owe me ..." I ask, nodding in the direction of the systems guy struggling in vain with the drives' eject lever.

"Ummm ... it's not QUICK-SET EXPOXY RESIN, is it?"

"Today's winner is ... THE PFY!" I cry.

We wander off back to the control room.

"When did you ..." the PFY begins.

"'Enhance' the cleaning tape? About six weeks ago - they never use it normally, so I knew it was the perfect remote destruction utility. You could call in from anywhere saying you have read errors ..."

"But you're just buying yourself time."

"Not exactly," I say, removing the labels from some recently abandoned tapes I found in the computer room into the "Scratch Tapes" bin.

"You bastard!" he cries respectfully.

"In the flesh, on the job, and ready for a game of Network Doom."

"You're on!"

---

### **As encryption is forced on the Bastard, he plots to give the Boss more of a shock than ever ...**

So the Pimply-Faced Youth and I are heading through the corridors of computing central when our progress is impeded by the departmental Dead Wood Discussion Group.

It is a matter of concern to me and the PFY that the group appears to be growing in size. Once a group of two or three old salts whose technical skills consisted of the ability to fix eight-inch floppy drives, it's now the final resting place of brown nosers and work dodgers alike.

To disguise their true purpose (work and responsibility avoidance) they indulge in long conversations about what's new in computing, where it's heading and why, what we should be looking at and who's up with the play.

This in itself wouldn't be so bad except (a) they either congregate in corridors or someone else's office and (b) they sometimes infect the boss with the forward-thinking-stupidity virus.

Today is one of those days. Encrypted TCP/IP and how it should be implemented is the topic of the four-hours.

We pause briefly...

"What does that guy do?" the PFY asks quietly, indicating one of the key speakers who's obviously attracted to the conversation by the possibility of slipping one of his strategically polished boat shoes one rung further up the corporate ladder with a display of superior knowledge.

"Besides providing a load for the deodoriser in the air conditioning?" I ask.

"I'm not sure, they all look alike to me."

The boss meantime is enthralled, envisaging a workplace coup in pushing back the frontiers of networking security.

This is not a good thing.

Sure enough, two hours later, the boss is wandering around the office with some hastily prepared notes in his hand.

"Tell me," he asks. "Why aren't we using encrypted TCP/IP?"

"Network overhead," I throw out to test the waters of his preparation.

"But isn't the overhead minimal when combined with private key encryption software or better, single-stage encryption?" he asks, so far out of his depth that the appearance of a shark's fin wouldn't be out of place in our conversation.

"Hey, I never thought of that!" I cry in an enlightened manner.

"Well, get right onto it," he responds, gushing enthusiasm.

"Sure thing."

The PFY is looking at me with the same thinly disguised contempt that was present on his features in the corridor scant hours ago.

"You're not going soft are you?" he enquires.

"This will speak for me," I say, indicating a recently installed PC in screen-save mode.

True to form, the PFY hits the return key...and the wall behind him microseconds later.

"It's good isn't it?" I say as he recovers his wits. "The word 'return' is in fact a carbon track, which, when the key is depressed, is connected to a high, but mostly harmless, earth return voltage. Now what was that about being soft?"

Doubting no more, the PFY helps me implement the Boss's request to the letter.

The boss receives this news with a smug expression and spends the next day composing a memo about the frontiers of networking, new era of security, blah, blah, blah. He words the memo so as to give the impression that he single-handedly soldered bits together with a cigarette lighter to make this possible.

To increase the effect, he selects the following Monday as the switchover date.

The day arrives, and the boss bowls in with The Head of IT in tow. With baited breath he waits for 9am to so that he can press the key to start encryption.

With a click from the clock, a clack from the keyboard, and a thud as the boss's stunned body hits the cast iron frame of an old tape rack with lots of nasty protruding edges that the PFY and I had only removed from the computer room that morning, encryption begins.

Then the calls start. Hands-free allows the head of IT to eavesdrop.

"Hello, networks," I say.

"Hi, this is the help desk. We're getting lots of calls from people who say that their machine is throwing up TCP/IP errors."

"Yes, that would be the one-step encryption."

"Well how do they decrypt?"

"You can't. I thought you knew that. If you could, it would be two steps wouldn't it?"

"ARE YOU SAYING THAT WE'VE JUST INSTALLED A SYSTEM THAT CAN'T TALK TO ANYTHING?" the head of IT blurts anxiously.

"Not we," I say holding up a recent memo.

"I see," the head says, recognising the buttered side of bread when shown it.

Sadly the boss's attempts to switch the system off resulted in a lot of unnecessary damage to the tape rack, but luckily the head was keen to let all the members of the DDG have a crack at it and eventually things got back to normal.

Status Quo reinstated - all systems go.

---

### **The PFY falls under a spell, much to the disgust of the BOFH who sets out to put things right**

...

It had to happen eventually, and to be frank, I'm surprised it's taken this long. Despite all my teachings, my vigorous expressions of displeasure at the merest mention of such a concept, and the countless reminders of the consequences of such actions, the pimply-faced-youth has let me down. He's in love.

One of the sad facts about working with networked computers all the time, especially when you see so much intimate stuff flying up the screen of the packet-watcher, is that your guard can drop. This is what happened with the PFY - he 'found' this woman talking to one of our junior bean-counter types on Internet Relay Chat (well, they were mad to think their Internet activities were unmonitored). He instantly persuaded her that PFYs who discover people in this way are much more fun than bean counters. Not that hard, of course, when you realise that making up UTP patch cables constantly for a fortnight is more fun than talking to a bean counter.

The phone rings.

"Network support, how can I help you?" sings the PFY in that sickly, lovey tone. You know the sort I mean.

"I seem to have accidentally deleted my Christmas card list from the server - could you possibly recover it from tape for me?"

"Hang about." >CLICK< >WHIRRRRRRR< >CHUNKACHUNKA< "... there you go."

"Oh, thank you so much!"

"No problem."

I check the said Christmas card list and it seems to be a Christmas card list.

No logic bomb, no Word prank macro, just a Christmas card list. This lad is ill.

I lean over to catch a glance of the SNMP window on the PFY's workstation to see which floor's network has this morning's intermittent drop-out. All I see is green, not an 'accidental' bandwidth saturation in sight. Worrying.

I also happen to notice that the background picture of his workstation seems to have changed to a picture of someone blonde and female.

"Is that ..." I inquire, pointing at the backdrop.

"Yup. Gorgeous, isn't she?"

I must admit, the word 'babe' isn't far from the front of my mind, though the urge to suddenly pull the fibre out of the back of the beancounter server pushes through and saves the day. I suddenly realise that while it's almost acceptable to carry a photo of one's other half in one's wallet, exchanging JPEGs is strictly anorak material.

"Did I tell you we're meeting up for the first time tonight?" sings the PFY's sickly voice. It's like fingernails on a blackboard, honestly.

"No," I reply wearily. I've managed to feign vague enthusiasm for a couple of days in the hope that he would see sense without assistance, but to no avail, so my patience is wearing rather thin.

"Where were you thinking of taking her?"

"Oh, I dunno - I'm quite new to this sort of thing, so I was hoping you would have an idea."

"Hmmm ... why not try that new seafood place on the High Street? It's pricey but highly regarded, and hey, you can charge it to the Boss's 'secret' expense account anyway."

"Good idea. I'll e-mail her now." Either my 'sincere' face hasn't worn off yet or he really should know better.

A quick filter on the mail hub soon has my afflicted colleague's beloved looking forward to a curry in Highgate.

Now to organise the other half of the plan; I send the PFY off down the road to buy his sweetheart some appropriate romantic shrubbery. This gets him out of the way for half an hour, so I take the opportunity to call in a favour.

The PFY takes the opportunity of a long lunch (thankfully, as all this lovey talk is making me feel rather queasy), and so it's not too bad enduring the last couple of hours of the day before he skips off smiling like the cat who got not only the cream, but half the dairy produce in the Home Counties.

Morning comes, and I rush in especially early at 11am in order to find out how my underling's evening went.

"Bloody awful. She was built like a smallish office block, she had a voice like Arthur Mullard, and she talked about her new Aveling Barford rock-grader all evening."

Funny, that sounds just like Julie, my next-door-neighbour's sister. But no, surely it couldn't be; she's not into computers, and she doesn't get time for dating - what with driving that dumper truck all day and doing her evening roly-poly-gram work.

"But what about the photo?"

"It's a fake. Oh, hell, I've had it with women".

>RING<

The PFY answers the phone.

"Network Support."

"My filestore is full."

"So?"

"So can I have some more space?"

"Sure, I'll give you some space ..." >CLACKYCLICKYHWOP<

"... there you go."

You've got five megs free now."

I glance at his console. 'rm -rf \*'. Now that's more like it.

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### **Where do you find a new pimply-faced-youth when you want one? It's a challenge, but ...**

It's a sad day in network operations. The pimply-faced-youth has decided to move on. Apparently, there are greener pastures out there that have a greater attraction for the young and foolish. He's accepted a position as a networks engineer for an oil company where the workmates are reasonable and the pay compromisingly attractive.

With a small amount of sentimentality, he takes his leave after two weeks' notice, during which time the boss gains the not unfamiliar "permanently hunted" expression...

Apparently, a 'misprint' in the on-line phone directory has seen his 'wrong number' count rise dramatically. Changing phone numbers didn't seem to help either for some reason. Finding out that he'd put in for, and been granted, a transfer to Wales led to some quite involved and desperate legal wrangles that kept him busy for a couple of days.

The interview process for a PFY replacement begins and it seems obvious that the calibre of applicants is not even up to prospective PFY potential.

Me: "A user complains about network speed. Would you investigate the problem or disconnect the network port altogether?"

They: "Investiga..."

Me: "Thank you, we'll let you know. Next!"

Me: "It's 4.54pm on a Friday and a user calls with a TCP/IP query. What do you do?"

They: "Answer their query?"

Me: "Trick question. You never answer the phone after 3pm on Friday! Even IF you're still at work! ...NEXT!"

Me: "You discover that the router firmware is several revisions out of date. Which do you do first: fill out a change-control form, arrange for storage of the old eproms, or order the upgrade?"

They: "Order the upgrade?"

Me: "No, crash the router every three hours until the boss begs you to upgrade as soon as possible, which will be four hours overtime at double rate. NEXT!"

After two days of interviewing, the boss decides that he'll pick the applicant. Sure enough, he picks Ronald, one of the worst people imaginable, one with blatant depth perception problems. And the users love him which is always a warning sign. I make the most of a bad thing until I can figure out a plan.

"OK Ron, I'll just show you ar..."

"No, Ronald, not Ron."

"I see." I make a mental note to leave a few floor tiles balanced precariously for his benefit.

I prepare him for his career in network support by getting him to dust out all the cabling ducts.

Two days and one ducting accident later, Gerald starts as our latest PFY. A puerile addition to the workforce, but at least he's rude to the users. Still, he lacks the killer instinct which distinguishes a true networking professional from the amateurs. And the technical intelligence not to wear the raincoat with the large metal fasteners when he's directed to the roof to 'calibrate the satellite antenna' during a thunderstorm. Whoopsy. Still, surface burns apparently heal fairly quickly.

Gerald follows Ronald's example in taking extended sick leave, and I'm left to hold the fort by myself. Things are very hectic as there's a limit to the number of phone calls you can listen to whilst still leaving time to play network Doom against the old PFY over the Internet.

Also, it seems to be getting extremely difficult to get applicants for the PFY's position. In fact, nigh-on impossible. Apparently, word has got out to the agencies that there is safer work juggling chainsaws full tilt on a unicycle down Battersea Rise, and they're staying away in droves.

Because I'm so short-staffed, I don't get round to fixing a lot of the network errors that plague the place. Like the boss's UTP port, which suddenly appears to have gone open circuit. Luckily, I'm able to restore interim connectivity to him by giving him a spare 2400 modem so he can dial the internal extension of our modem banks. At 2400 baud, his file server really hums. Not to mention the power supply of the modem which draws so much power that the lights dim when he switches it on.

The boss is at his wit's end when I offer him a possibility. If he offered a finder's fee and a reasonable rate, I might be able to replace the PFY.

The boss jumps at the outstretched straw and mentions two very acceptable numbers. I give the PFY a call and make him an offer he could refuse but won't.

He doesn't.

A day later the PFY is back in business having returned from his holiday to a pay rise. What the boss doesn't know can't hurt him. Except for that carpet tack I drove into the base of his chair.

A high pitched scream filters through to the control room as I shake the PFY's hand.

I LOVE this business.